

PATTERNS

A series of parallel dashed lines in black and white, slanted diagonally across the teal background, creating a sense of depth and movement.

57TH
EDITION



THE 57th EDITION OF PATTERNS

THIS YEAR’S EDITION MARKS OUR CONTINUED FOCUS ON IMPROVING THE PHYSICAL AND AESTHETIC QUALITIES OF THE MAGAZINE, INCLUDING AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF FULL-COLOR PAGES THAT BEGAN LAST YEAR. WE ARE ALSO DELIGHTED TO POINT OUT THE EXTRAORDINARILY HIGH QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF SUBMISSIONS THIS YEAR, LEADING TO A SUBSTANTIALLY LARGER ISSUE THAN IN RECENT YEARS.

WHAT IS PATTERNS?

Patterns magazine is St. Clair County Community College’s literary and arts publication. Published annually since 1959, *Patterns* showcases the best writing and visual artwork produced by SC4 students each year. While organization and oversight of the publication has always been handled by SC4 faculty and staff, over the years we have increasingly involved students in every aspect of the publication: from producing its content, to editing, to the creative layout and design work, our students have taken on a major role in creating each issue of the magazine.

THE PATTERNS WRITING & ART COMPETITION

Since its inception, *Patterns* has featured student writing and artworks selected as the results of a competition conducted in the fall of the year. Panels of volunteer judges in the faculty of English and Fine Arts determine which works will be published.

VISITING ARTISTS FORUM

In the year 2000, SC4 professor Jim Frank applied for a grant to fund the first *Patterns* Visiting Artists Forum, a program that invited professional writers of national and international repute to act as judges for the *Patterns* competition and to come to our campus in April to conduct writing workshops, meet with students, faculty, staff and community members, and to give public readings of their own work. Professor Frank’s initiative continued for 15 years and hosted poets, novelists, playwrights, essayists and visual artists of high caliber – including winners of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award. This year, for the first time since the forum began, we weren’t awarded the grant support we applied for. We hope to bring the forum back next year.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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St. Clair County Community College





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Women’s Life 757

PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES SUPPORTED BY FRIENDS OF THE ARTS INCLUDE:

- *Patterns* magazine
 - Educational Arts Outreach projects in music, theatre and visual art
 - Outreach choir concerts
 - SC4 Symphonic Band concerts
 - Free Noon and Night Concert Series, including free music workshops
 - Free Twilight Concert Series
- Special musical performances
 - Student, alumni and faculty art exhibitions
 - Theatrical productions with the SC4 Players

SC4 FACULTY AND STAFF SKIPPER PLEDGE OF EXCELLENCE

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SC4 Friends of the Arts is a committed group of businesses, community members and SC4 faculty and staff, that support the arts at SC4, including music, theatre, creative writing and visual arts. They are building community through the arts.



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MARISSA JESSEE

For more than thirty years, the English faculty of SC4 has awarded the Eleanor Mathews Award for “outstanding creativity, technical skill, and individual style” to recognize student writers for overall achievement in creative writing. Traditionally the Matthews Award has been given to a deserving student who has had work published in *Patterns* in multiple genres and/or over a number of years. This year’s Mathews winner is something of a special case: the only student writer in recent memory to have had works in all three genres—poetry, fiction, and non-fiction essay—selected for publication. That means that our winner, Marissa Jessee, impressed all nine of our judges, in three separate “blind” judging panels, of the extraordinary quality of her work.



AMANDA ROGERS

The Patrick Bourke Award honors an art student who has made a commitment to pursue an advanced degree in one of the visual arts disciplines and has been an advocate and emissary for art at St. Clair County Community College. This year’s recipient is Amanda Rogers who is currently completing her associate’s degree in graphic design. Amanda is being honored for her dedication to the arts and for the exceptional quality and caliber of the work that she produces.





LITERARY
POETRY • SHORT STORIES • ESSAYS

EMIGRANT

BLANCHE REDMAN AWARD STEFFANI GENTRY POETRY



A little Panzer on course.
Unstoppable.
A quick note to family.
Goodbye. I am gone.

She worked while aboard.
A translator.
German to English.
Old to new.

Slacks for comfort
And scarf at hand.
A brand new look
For a fresh start.

Behind her
A nation of shame.
Ahead, Lady Liberty,
Port side in the sun.

Always petite
She climbed for the view.
Little German girl,
Big American ship.

MIDNIGHT SKY

FIRST PLACE STEFFANI GENTRY POETRY



The colors of day are gone,
Slipped beneath the horizon

Leaving a mystery of blue

As deep as the ocean.

It drapes around me,

A sumptuous blanket

Quilted with shimmers of starlight,

Plush comfort in my solitude.

The whisperings of leaves

Speak quiet tales of solace

And bygone days of summer.

The night is my cocoon.

ROAD TRIP

SECOND PLACE AMANDA BROWN POETRY



Riding shotgun on a long road trip,
Long, light brown hair blowing with the windows down,
“Living young, and wild, and free!”
Singing to the radio turned on full blast.
Watching harvesters leave corn stubbles behind.
Vibrant blues, yellows, and oranges on her shirt,
Aviator sunglasses over her sun tanned face.
Laughing loudly, showing the gap between her teeth.
Taking pictures along the way as a memoir.
Resting her head back as she looks to the sky,
An eagle soars high above them.
Arms out the window wanting to fly.

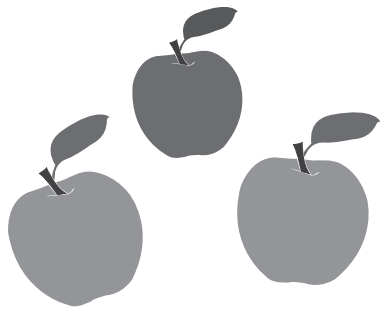
DESPERATE

AMANDA BROWN POETRY

A woman smoking a cigarette wearing nothing but a bathrobe,
Hair turned gray like the world around her, she covers it in dye and foil.
Dark blue curtains cover the windows intensifying her isolation.
An old pair of glasses held together by a piece of tape.
Uniform draped over door for her job at the Cracker Barrel.
Unfortunately seeing her mother as she looks in the mirror.
Every paycheck felt as if her life depended upon.
Saving money any way she can by not repairing that burnt out bulb.
Drying her hands on the over used towel behind the bathroom door,
Questioning where she went wrong as she dumped ashes on a paper plate.

APPLE BUCKET

STEFFANI GENTRY POETRY



Long shadows slither
Through a dusty window
Announcing another day spent.

Feeble stuff, this light without warmth,
Softly kissing seasoned oak
And rusty staves.

The forgotten bucket lies
Toppled over on its side,
Its last fruits spilling free.

Few apples remain.
Their ripened scent fills the room
Like a pungent memory of youth.

An apple a day
An apple a day,
Until it is fruitless.

FRESH-BAKED POEMS

STEFFANI GENTRY POETRY

They will arrive.
Believe.

Artisan breads,
They ferment
And rise.

Then punch,
They deflate
To rise again.

Elastic
In my hands.

I knead,
Then shape.

MOTHER’S HANDS

STEFFANI GENTRY POETRY

Her skin is parchment.	Dancing	All departed.
Bluish veins	With angels.	Just one last angel,
A roadmap	No idle hands	Less two fingers,
To choices	For devil’s work.	Full of grace.
Less than wise.	Each winter	
Two fingers missing.	Fingers flying.	
Payment made.	A gathering of angels	
Cotton and steel.	At her command,	
Time abandoned	Crisp and starchy white.	
Turned countless stitches.	The ballet closed.	
Her hands were the Bolshoi,	No curtain calls.	
Full of grace,	Dancers	



SUMMER CAMP

STEFFANI GENTRY POETRY

The sky was blue,
A robin’s egg.
Cotton candy clouds
Soar above.

Distant calls
Marco! Polo!
As campers splash
Farewell to the lake.

Smells waft past.
Campfire ghosts.
Wood smoke and
Charred marshmallow.

One last sit
On the sunny boardwalk,
Three musketeers
With warm bottoms.

Two weeks ago
We were turtles.
Today plastic monkeys,
Arm in arm in arm.

SHOPPING FOR ONE

STEFFANI GENTRY POETRY

Shuffle, shuffle,
the old man moves.

Tired and grey.
He leans on the cart,
His shoulders bent
With unseen burdens,
A drab, wrinkled shirt
Mirrors the lines
On his colorless face.

He peers out
Through bleary eyes,
Breakfast cereals
More than he
Can comprehend,
Shelf after shelf,
Box after box.

His trembling hand reaches,
Liver spots, wrinkles,
A worn gold band.
He changes his mind
Afraid he might bumble

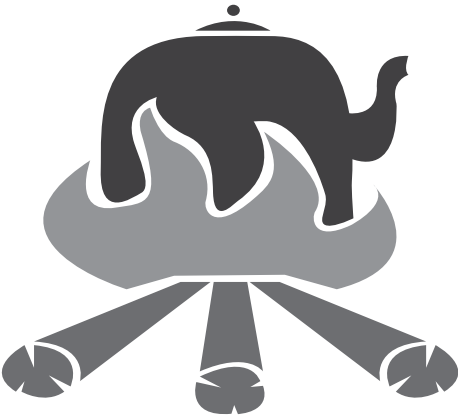
And make bright-colored dominoes
Tumble end to end.

Two aisles to the soup,
Beef stew, chicken dumpling.
Memories of Her stirring
At the stove,
In his head.
Grasping,
He takes two cans...

The old man moves on.
Shuffle, shuffle.

KETTLE ON THE FIRE ON A SNOWY EVENING

STEFFANI GENTRY POETRY



The winter wind is whistling
Round the willow in the yard,
But the cottage is warm and cozy,
Full of light and beef stew smells.

Distant sleigh bells ring and ting.
He lifts head, ear and tail.
A pause, a hush, not our bells,
So back to soup-bone dreams.

Outside the snowflakes start to fall
In the village by the lake.
It will not be much longer now,
Because the kettle's on the fire.

He promised he would bring me
Squeaky toys and meaty treats,
When man returns to home tonight.
When man returns to home.

HOURL 23

STEFFANI GENTRY POETRY

I float
In dark seclusion.

Streams of light,
Each a life.
White ones come;
Red ones go.

Feral watchers.
Flash pairs
Of yellow-gold
Reflections.

Dim blue flickers.
Prisoners in thrall
Bound by co-ax
To digital boxes.

I withdraw,
Spiral inward,
Facing demons,
Chasing angels.

Night is
An isolation tank.

PACE YOURSELF

NATHANIEL RYAN POETRY

Pace yourself,

You're only this brave when you're dumb and drunk,

Limit your intake

photos, memories, songs,

Under the influence of these precious things

Climb behind the wheel

In this state you will surely end

your obsession

Go for a drive to sober up, you romantic, drunken fool,

If she won't love you like she once did

the bottle will

LANA’S CHOICE

AIMEE CAMPBELL POETRY

That is the choice we are
always making:

What lines we cross.

She’s there right now.

As she lies upon the cool
grass,

legs crossed, head in palms.

No sounds to disturb her.

Only the birds, singing their
song,

and the rustling of trees
surrounds her.

Yet inside she is conflicted.

Inside she is riddled with
turmoil.

She must leap off that cliff,
into a life that is not her own,
for the sake of her family.

Today she will breathe in the wild
flowers,
tomorrow she will submit to him.

THE TRAIN

MARISSA JESSEE POETRY

Flashing lights at a railroad
stop,

The train blustering along the
tracks,

Sparks propelling themselves
from the metal wheels

Abrading the railroad tracks.

Headlights so bright, too
bright,

Illuminating everything
between each passing rail car

Through previously black
reflections.

A heavy dead feeling washes
over,

Leaving nothing in it’s path but a
numbing sensation.

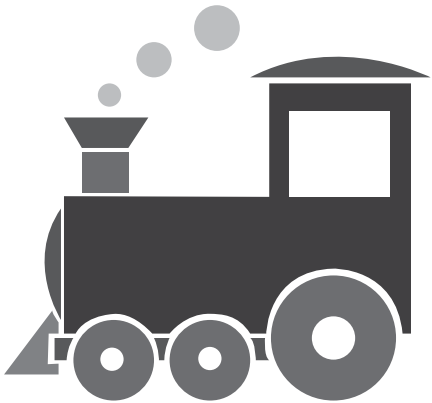
Lungs tightening, fingers shaking,
each moment lasting an eternity.

The flashing lights raise and go dark.

Headlights move past lighting a new
way,

And the crushing wave subsides,

Leaving still, calm waters.



OPEN WINDOWS

RICHARD COLWELL AWARD TRAVIS BOONE SHORT STORY

Jimmy was the first to see her. He sneaked out of the house one night to retrieve a comic book from his neighbor friend when he saw the woman in the yellow house on the corner a few blocks away. It didn't take long for him to tell his friends. For a young boy caged in suburbia, this discovery was nothing short of a sinful miracle. Jimmy knew he couldn't keep it all to himself.

So the following weekend of his discovery of the woman in the yellow house, Jimmy led his friends down the cleanly paved street, a bold black pathway to their treasure, with Jimmy being the one holding the only working flashlight he could find. They walked eagerly, making as little sound as possible. Lining the street were a few evenly scattered lamp posts barely keeping enough light for late night traveling.

The front window of the yellow house gave off a soft warm light which hit the front part of its green lawn. Jimmy and the other young boys were directly in front of the house, hiding behind some light bushes near where the lawn met the street.

"Okay. Just wait, you'll see. Just wait."

The boys all huddled together and breathed long and quietly. Jimmy set the flashlight to the right of him next to one of his friends. One of the boys pulled out an inhaler and used it loudly, and another boy reached out and swatted him on the back of the head. The rest of the boys started shushing the swatter, and the swatter shushed back at the boys. A little boy bushel of shushes erupted in which Jimmy sternly whispered to "be quiet! Christ, she's coming! Look! Look—!"

Perfectly framed by the front window of the yellow house, in a room warmly lit by a single table lamp, a woman appeared from a far door. She walked as if her feet were growing heavier each passing second. She was wearing nothing but panties and a brassiere.

The inhaler, the swatter, Jimmy, and the rest of the boys, gasped. Their eyes locked onto the woman.

The woman in the room was pale and thin, and had short blonde hair. She held her arms in a way which covered where her nipples would be. Her head hung low, and looking down at the ground, she reached her arms out, crouched into a ball, and laid down on the carpet. She closed her eyes.

The boys watched as if it would be the last woman they'd ever see. They looked at the way her knees almost touched her breasts as she laid down, and they traced from her knees up her thighs to a glowing outline of her backside. They followed the pouting curve of her backside up through her abdomen and ended up at her shoulders and neck, a pulsating neck. Her whole body suddenly flinched and her eyes shot open.

The woman stood up quickly, stumbling a bit before achieving balance, and she walked to a door at the left wall, which led to an unlit room with another front window.

The boys, still crouched, followed the woman. They shuffled to their left and sat to watch in front of the next window. After a few seconds, a light came on, revealing that the right half of the window was covered with a curtain, only obstructing their view of the woman with a gentle blur, revealing the curves of her body as a silhouette against a thin veil. More left, slightly peeking from behind the curtain, was a wooden baby's crib. The woman stood motionless in front of it.

At this point Jimmy was no longer focusing on her body. He squinted and leaned forward.

Without looking away from the crib, the woman put her right hand over her mouth and her left hand across her chest to hold her right arm. Her abdomen started to move in and out sharply, and she bent forward slightly, her hand covering her mouth. The boys watched her begin to cry. As she bent forward, her head slowly turned toward the window. Seeing the woman's head turn and face them, from behind the thin curtain, some boys jumped up and ran away in a frightened rush. One

of the boys kicked the flashlight away from Jimmy in trying to escape, launching it into the surrounding darkness. Jimmy remained calm. He knew that from behind the bushes they couldn't be seen, and he figured she wasn't looking outside because even though she turned her head, she kept bending forward toward the crib. The woman lowered her right ear down at the crib and listened. Jimmy, the inhaler, and a boy wearing his father's baseball cap stayed watching the woman listen to the crib.

Jimmy lightly shook his head as he stared. The image of this woman struggling to find comfort in her own home confused him, and ultimately frightened him. He looked as hard as he could into the window to see if there was a baby in the crib at all. He turned to his right to look at the remaining two friends and saw that they were already staring at him. Jimmy shook his head again.

On the walk back, Jimmy apologized, saying he saw her standing naked one night and thought it wouldn't have been so strange. When Jimmy got home after saying goodbye to the others, he opened the window to his room and quietly climbed in, lit only by the gentle street lamps and soft moonlight from outside, along with a weak night light resembling a space ship at the far corner near his nightstand. He took off his shoes and pants and sat on his bed, facing his open window. He heard the far footsteps of one of his friends going back to their house down the street. The footsteps were slower now, *he must not be as scared*, Jimmy thought. But instead of getting gradually quieter, they became louder. Jimmy went to his window to see what his friend was doing, but once he looked out the window, he saw it wasn't any of his friends, but a thin scantily robed blonde-haired woman, the same woman

who he saw that one night, and tonight; the same woman he allowed himself to fantasize about when he’s supposed to be resting. She walked toward his house with more energy than before, and her right hand was behind her back, holding something, but hiding it from Jimmy.

Jimmy fell to the floor and breathed heavily, leaning on the wall under his window. *What is she doing, is she going to talk to my mom, my dad, is she going to kill me*, he thought. He had never felt a fear so sharp. Her bare feet slapping on the asphalt towards his window met with the grass of his front lawn. He didn’t get up to shut the window because he didn’t know how close she was, as any sudden movements might be a mistake.

The sound of her moving feet stopped. Jimmy tried breathing as little as possible to avoid giving away his location. He heard her arm move. *It must be the arm hiding something behind her back. Her hand holding the hidden thing sounded metallic. Oh my God, she’s going to shoot me.* A voice came from outside his room, from the window; it was quiet, almost inaudible, and gentle:

“Please—”

The woman placed the object on the window’s ledge. The boy looked up and saw the top of the flashlight they had lost placed on the ledge. He crawled away from the window and stood up to look at her.

Her robe wasn’t closed, and most of her body was revealed to the boy. Her body stood as if Earth’s gravity were a foreign phenomena. He saw her face closer now: her eyes were bloodshot and thin, and her mouth hung open slightly, lips cracked and faded. Black lines dripped from the corners of her eyes down her cheeks. She was thinner up close than through her own window. The cold

light coming from the summer moon made her look blue in color. Jimmy stayed silent as she spoke in exhalations:

“Please don’t—I can’t feel his weight in me with eyes on anyone, anyone can’t feel their hands with eyes watching, not really—you can’t watch like that—”

Jimmy didn’t know what she was talking about. Winds passing softly accompanied her voice entering his room, and they brushed against his sweat-filled face, releasing energy. He heard how tired she was, he heard how much she had been crying.

“When you have that thing in your hand—whether it be a baby, a seed, an idea—”

Swaying gently, she appeared as if she were asleep. Her eyes closed.

“You cannot—how is it the past—I mean right now is right now. How—what are we—your name is the least you know about you. God, you didn’t give me, you didn’t give me the strength—please, make your own strength for yourself.”

The woman took a few steps back and began walking back to her home.

Jimmy stood there motionless as she walked away, across his lawn onto the asphalt of the street, gradually disappearing into the night.

He walked over to his window, grabbed the flashlight from the ledge, and reached up to close the window. The window shut smoothly.

The sounds of night were cut off, and he was left to bask in an environment now completely made of him: his

room, his drawings, the sounds of his breathing, fabrics rubbing against his skin as he moved, and the swallowing in his throat.

Flashlight in hand, he crawled in his bed and threw the covers over him. He laid under his covers with his knees up at his abdomen and his arms folded in front of him, resting his hands in front of his face. Under the covers he felt safe. He turned the flashlight on, hurting his eyes, not realising how bright it was going to be.

He imagined the fetus inside of the woman, soaking in the life and floating in her, gently and gracefully. He pictured all of the blood that the woman and the fetus might share, floating in and out of both of them, rivers and seas and oceans of bloods and fluids. In his mind the fetus floated in a golden sphere, warm and weightless. He studied the covers surrounding him, and the yellow bright light being given off by the flashlight. Under the covers it was warm and humid. With no warning, the flashlight shut itself off. Jimmy twiddled at the switch desperately to try to turn it back on, but the light wouldn’t reappear. ♦

DONN HOUSE

FIRST PLACE TRAVIS BOONE **SHORT STORY**

Against the cloudless blue sky, another bird launched itself downward toward the front lawn of the Donn's well-kept summer home. Passing through thin tree tops, the bird hit the ground with lethal velocity. Surrounding the bird were others like it: beaks broken, heads split open, wings torn and removed.

Patricia Donn walked toward her home clinging tightly to grocery bags containing the family's dinner, avoiding several remains of birds as she stepped along. Walking up to the front door, she put the groceries down and looked into the screen separating the inside of the home from the summer day. She saw a narrow hallway with a door at each side leading to a room with a turntable and a leisure chair next to a desk with faded flowers in a glass vase. Her hands brushed her pink-spotted summer dress gently. She swallowed saliva and cleared her throat. She closed her eyes and listened to the home.

"Mom—!" A voice came from within the home, followed by sprinting footsteps belonging to a small boy. "Mom, is that dinner?"

She opened her eyes and locked onto the boy's. She stood there motionless as she stared. A wind picked up ruffling leaves on the trees and expired quickly, throwing some leaves into the air. A large man passed on his bicycle, leaving a light trail of blood behind him. A factory whistle erupted in the distance followed by sounds of a locomotive releasing steam into the air. Another bird plummeted on the front lawn, releasing a scratched yell before losing life. The stare between Patricia and the boy was broken by a deep mature voice: "Hon, what a thing! What an excellent dinner that will be made in our lives and on this day, this day of leisure. On this summer day, a roast will be made! What a thing."

Patricia looked at the father and briefly smiled. She grabbed the groceries at her side and the boy opened the screen door for her.

The turntable played the sounds of the early works of Jo Stafford. *You Belong To Me* was playing, accompanied by the whispers of the father mouthing and sounding the cheerful tune and lyrics: "Send me photographs and souvenirs, just remember when a dream appears...."

Placing the groceries on the granite countertop, the mother turned, grabbed the boys head, and kissed his hair. "*Maybe you'll be lonesome too, and blue....*" She looked at the boy's sweater and quickly re-tucked the back into his corduroy slacks. She walked over to the oven and turned the knob until it could no longer rotate while the father pulled out the many foods and bottles from the bags. The mother watched the oven's insides give off a subtle orange glow. She sighed. Another bird plummeted.

The father looked up. He spoke in a heavy drone: "Is there something wrong?"

"Oh goodness honey, no. Nothing's wrong. I'm just trying to remember what to heat the oven up to — I never remember. I can have such a bad memory when it comes to recipes!"

"What?" asked the father. "What did you say, sometimes ovens talk?"

" — what?"

The father gave a wide grin. "Our oven just asked us: what is the one thing all men share?"

The mother narrowed her eyes. Her hand grabbed the fabric of her dress and clung tightly to it.

"A one-eyed Reilly."

The mother let go of the dress and exhaled, "oh, yes yes! That is very funny sweetie."

"Their mortality," said the boy.

The mother closed her eyes and performed her ten second breathing exercise. In a loud episode low ha's, the father repeatedly slammed his hand upon the countertop. The mother looked at the oven and saw the numbers on the temperature meter were blank and gasped. The boy quickly grabbed a soapy fork out of the sink and maneuvered it under his father's hand, breaking the skin on his palm. The father lifted his hand and shouted in pain, grasping his wrist and running across the kitchen to grab a cloth. Two more birds.

"I'll check if it's hot enough," said the boy.



He skipped to the beat of the record behind him and opened the oven slowly. His eyes squinted upon feeling the heat escape over his face. He reached his hand out and placed it in the oven on the metal rack. His fingers stretched out, becoming motionless. The soap and water from the sink sizzled on his skin. The mother watched, eyes widening, mouth hanging open, waiting. Soon the smell of burning blood and charring skin filled their kitchen. The sizzling on his hand faded away as all external moisture evaporated. The boy's eyes jumped around the room searching for an appropriate judgement. Gently pulling his hand away, his head turned slowly to his mother. "That's pretty hot for a roast." The boy ran into the other room and pulled a chair out from the dinner table. The father followed in a playful rush. The mother quickly grabbed the bottles from the counter and stuffed them into the oven, shutting it nervously and trembling uncontrollably.

"Looks like my men are hungry—!" spoke the mother's shaking voice. "You both are just a couple of black holes over there. Always eating!"

"Compensation," said the father and the boy.

The mother joined her family in the next room at the dinner table. The three of them looked at each other and sighed. The mother grabbed the father's bloody hand and held it, fingers locking. The mother looked into the father's eyes, and for a moment, became completely still. The boy looked at his mother and his eyes widened. The mother looked outside, noticing another bird falling. She noticed the green leaves against the blue sky, an empty yellow school bus passing

on the street, the mixture of greens and reds scattered on their front lawn. She saw a dark smoke rise in the air in the far distance from smokestacks. She closed her eyes, finally placing herself in an overwhelming comfort. Smoke was billowing out of the oven, filling the kitchen. Flames were escaping from the top of the oven, burning the surrounding wall. The flames travelled out of the oven to the wooden cupboards and drawers. Papers, pictures, and foods burned away. The turntable spoke Jo Stafford's calmed voice: "*'Til the stars burn out above you, 'til the moon is but a silver shell....*"

The father and son looked around at the surrounding heat and flames. The Donn household let out gradual groans and low moans. The ceiling above the family cracked and the room around them shook. The father turned his head toward the boy and coughed. The skin on his face slowly darkened and flaked, and his hair burst into a quick bright flare. He lifted his unoccupied hand toward his face and pressed on his skin to prevent any fluids from leaking. The boy



shook his head, casting a disappointed gaze at his mother. He removed his sweater, noticing the back of it was already in flames. He felt flames beneath his chair and catching his slacks. The home gave a low howl as windows shattered and furniture fell apart. The mother tightened her grip on the fathers hand. Jo Stafford was drawn out by the roar of the flames around the family. The boy watched large pieces of wood and fire fall on the mother; her head bent backward and her body folded, forced down to the ground by the weight. The father shut his eyes tightly and began to convulse violently. The boy closed his eyes and felt an incredible weight press against his head and legs, feeling his torso buckle as the house came down.

The remains of the home were still. The neighborhood was silent. From the blackened ashes near the front edge on the lawn appeared a bird. Ruffling its feathers and stretching its wings, it shook most of the ash off of its body and flew away into the horizon of the summer's evening sky. ♦

THE OAK TREE

SECOND PLACE ELIZABETH MAHLSTEDT SHORT STORY

Miya's waist-length, crimson curls shimmered in the golden sunlight, flowing along with the light, warm, summer breeze that was blowing in from the east.

She was resting on a hilltop overlooking her village; below her was the entire town, all of the houses and fields, people strolling through its dust covered streets, sheep and cows munching away in the grassy pastures.

To the far west she was able catch sight of her home, a little stone cottage on the edge of the meadow, grey smoke rising from its chimney and into the clear blue sky.

What she couldn't see, however, was the event that was happening inside the thick, rock walls of her home; Lucas, elder brother to Miya by four years, had just informed his parents that he and his lover, Aleena, the prettiest girl in the whole village with her shoulder-length flaxen locks and petite figure, were to marry by the next moon. Cheers of joy rose from inside, a chicken that was pecking just outside the front door scattering off into the bushes, startled by the sudden noise. Hugs and kisses were shared along with good-luck wishes and tips for raising a family, smiles spread from ear to ear.

Not one of their minds, though, thought about how Miya should have been present for the news, as she was merely a shadow in her family's life, always in the vicinity but scarcely ever called upon.

Miya laid back into the tall grass, her hair scattering around her. She shut her pale emerald eyes at the bright sun and let out a deep sigh, enjoying the distant star's rays falling across her pale face.

The stiff grass poked at the soft, light pink skin of her legs, tickling them slightly and making her giggle quietly. Opening her eyes once more, she adjusted herself until she was comfortable, brushing a stray ant off of her chest and sending it flying into the air, the insect landing silently a few feet away slightly dazed but otherwise okay.

She patted down the rest of her lilac colored dress, removing any more insects that might have begun to investigate the strange being that had invaded their land, and looked to her right at the tall, leafy oak tree that could be spotted above the grass.

"Mommy, look at that tree! It's kissing the sky!" The little girl, eleven years of age, tugged on her mother's apron, pointing at the green leaves of the lone tree, the only oak in their little town. "Can I climb it mommy? Can I please?"

"Yes, fine, go ahead dear," her mother mumbled distractedly, her attention focused on the half-finished basket in front of her.

The girl squealed and ran off towards the hill, throwing herself onto its steep slope and propelling herself about half way up before she stumbled and fell, her bare knee scraping against a small rock. That didn't stop her though, and soon she was at the top.

Making a circle around its trunk, she craned her neck up to observe the underside of the leaves, wondering how she was going to get up. In a blink of an eye, she was sitting on the ground, having run into something soft and falling over. It was a boy. "Hello. Sorry I ran into you."

"It's fine. Here," the sandy-haired boy offered out a hand, helping the girl in the pretty pink dress to her feet. "I'm Opal."

Miya let out a giggle, "But Opal's a girl's name! You're not a girl!"

"No, I'm not a girl. I don't know why my name's Opal, but I do know I don't like it. What's your name?"

"Miya. Pleased to meet you," she gave the skinny child a pat on the shoulder before glancing back up at the treetop. "Can you help me up there? I want to kiss the sky, sort of like the leaves!"

Opal, a year older than Miya, was a good 5 inches taller, and also stronger. He grabbed her by her waist and hoisted her onto his shoulders so her legs were dangling on his chest. She didn't protest much, but she did have a strong grip, her little fingers grasping onto his short hair, "Oi! That hurts!"

"Sorry! You didn't warn me!" She let go of his coarse hair

and reached for the tree's lowest branches, her fingertips not even near touching them. "I still can't reach!"

"You'll have to stand on my shoulders then. Be prepared; I'm going to lift you," his hands gripped her waist once more, lifting her up until his arms were fully extended and her feet were planted firmly on his shoulders. "You're very light."

"I know, I don't eat much; I'm almost never hungry," her hands could easily grab onto the lower branches now. "I can reach now. Don't look up my dress!" She was a strong girl. Climbing things and exploring was one of her favorite pastimes, so her upper-body strength was excellent. She pulled herself up with ease, swinging her legs over the branch to straddle it comfortably. "Do you want to come up? The view is lovely."

"Sure," backing up a few feet, Opal got a running start and leaped at the branches, his hands easily getting hold of the trees limbs. He was up in no time.

Glancing over at Miya, he gave her a sly smile and continued to climb higher, but not too high, "Are you coming?"

Soon they were sharing a branch, looking out over the town through a gap in the leaves, her head resting on his upper arm, "I have dreams about the sky. Flying through the clouds with the birds, drifting on the wind... I like it up here."

Opal didn't say anything, he just nodded. He was thinking of his own dreams, ones where he started on a cloud and ended up falling down through the heavens, landing on the ground not breathing. Not dreams, nightmares. He shivered, wrapping the tattered leather jacket he was wearing closer around him.

They stayed up there for hours, long enough for the sun to melt into the horizon and for the moon to shine high above them, coating their view in a white glow.

Miya had fallen asleep leaning up against him, her small snores somewhat comforting in the quiet night. Opal was soon nodding off himself, his headed bobbing against his chest, his eyelids staying closed longer and longer every time he blinked...

A piercing scream jolted him awake, the space next to him, where Miya should have been, empty. There was a soft thump below and another cry, "Miya!" He was on the ground in an instant, crouching next to her and looking over her body, searching for anything wrong.

Her leg. He did a little shuffle until he was leaning over her shin, the bone clearly broken and poking at her skin, "You'll be alright, okay? Come on."

Picking her up, Opal carried her down the hill, careful not to stumble on its rocky surface and lose his footing. He took her to her house, knocking on the front door with his foot, "Help! Miya's hurt!" The windows in the house were dark, everyone inside asleep. They couldn't hear him.

Setting her down on a heap of logs next to the door, he flung it open and helped her inside, rushing down the hall into her parent's bedroom, "Didn't you hear me?? Your daughter is hurt! She needs help!" Nothing but a grumbled, "That's nice," from her mother and a "Stupid girl," from her father.

Opal would have to aid her on his own. Chopping up a log outside, he made a makeshift brace from wood and rope. "This is going to hurt, but I promise it'll feel better when I'm done," holding onto her hand tight, he adjusted the bone in her leg until it seemed to be returned to the right location.

Miya's screams of pain awakened her parents from their slumber, "What the hell Miya!" her father yelled, stumbling into the living room half-asleep. He rubbed his eyes and observed the scene in front of him, his young daughter receiving medical attention from a boy that had hardly any knowledge in the medical field. "Keep it down, good lord," and with that he was back off to bed.

Opal tried to keep his fury in check as he tied up her leg in the brace, helping Miya back to her bedroom and into bed, "Are you okay now?"

"Yes, thank you," she leaned up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I'm really glad you helped me; my parents—"

"Shh, I know. Go to sleep. You need it. Goodnight Miya," and he was gone.

That was the only time she saw Opal. Seven years later and she had never heard of him again, the limp she walked with his only remainder. She wished she could see him again. Thank him once more for his help that night.

Miya had fallen asleep in the grass, the thought of Opal the last thing on her mind as she drifted off. His kind smile appeared in her dreams, his hands on her sides as he aided her to her wish of sitting in the sky.

When she awoke, the moon was high above her, its crescent shape giving off only a small amount of light, the stars around it sparkling.

It was then when she realized someone was holding her hand. Rolling her head to the left, she expected to find Josh, a boy from her school that had a crush on her, to be there. She was completely wrong.

"Opal....?"

"Hm?"

Her heart fluttered and she sprang on him, lifting him slightly off the ground and into a tight, caring hug. "What—"

"Do you know what today is?" He let her go, adjusting himself so he could sit without her support. His eyes bore into her, waiting for her answer.

She looked him over in the pale moonlight, his features more defined that what she remembered, but his hair still the same sandy color. Her head searched for the date; it was the Thirtieth of June. "Seven years ago today..."

"Yes. Seven years since I sat with you on the edge of the sky. Since you fell asleep on my arm, and since you broke your leg," he glanced down at her exposed knee, a slight knob in her skin where the bone had grown back wrong. "Ah, I see I didn't do a very good job of fixing you."

"It's alright. You helped me when no one else was there," her eyes locked with his, her insides fluttering at the sight of him. "Where did you go? Where have you been the past seven years, Opal, you—"

"You talk quite a bit, don't you? Still haven't changed..." His lips curled into a grin as she turned away, blushing. "I'm just kidding. I love hearing your voice. It's been so long since I have.."

Her blush only grew deeper. *Thankfully it's too dark out for him to see*, she thought to herself before saying anything "I only talk a lot around friends. My family thinks I'm mute for the most part," she kept her reply short, not wanting to bore him with the details. "Are you going to answer my question?"

"Yes," she heard him moving in the grass before she felt him behind her. "Be prepared, I'm going to lift you," he grabbed her hips and pulled her on to her lap; Same thing he said those years ago, she realized, not even paying enough attention ask what he was doing. "How old are you now, Miya?"

"Eighteen..." she replied nervously, now weary of what he was planning on doing. His chest to her back, she could feel his legs on either side of her and the warmth of his body soaking through their clothes, keeping the nip of the cool night air away. "How about you? Nineteen?"

"Just turned nineteen. Lean back now, don't be afraid," his voice was so soothing, so reassuring. The same voice from seven years ago, just deeper. The back of her head rested on his shoulder, her wild curls tickling his jaw. Their bodies fit perfectly together, her small frame protected by his slightly larger, but not too muscular, one. "Close your eyes, I'm going to show you where I've been."

Her eyes were closed for a second when she felt his fingertips on her temples, pressing slightly. At first, nothing happened. She was just about to ask him what in the world he was doing when colors flooded into her head, smells and sounds overwhelmed her other senses before evening out, the image a place different from her town of Vernea.



White-capped waves crashed against a rocky shoreline, spray landing on Opal’s face as he stood by watching. The sun hadn’t rose above the horizon in days, his land was covered in a twilight glow constantly now.

He looked to his feet, “Come on,” he tapped a blue orb that was resting on the rocks with the tip of his shoe, the thick glass clinking on its rough sole. The thing hadn’t worked properly in almost seven years, back when it had transported him to a land of green, a land full of life, a land in deep contrast to this rocky outcrop he called home. The other times it had plopped him in some random location, places he didn’t know where, places he never wanted to visit again.

He sighed, bending over to pick it up. The urge to throw it into the ocean was so bad, to rid the thing from his life and never see it again; it caused him too much trouble. But one of these days it might work correctly. Instead, he tucked it into the pocket of his trousers, “Maybe tomorrow. Exactly seven years tomorrow, maybe,” he was rambling to himself as he trudged back to his little wooden house, his head suddenly foggy with tiredness, “Maybe tomorrow.”

Miya gasped as she slipped out of the trance, coughing the sea air out of her lungs. Her world slowly came back into focus, and so did her fright. She scrambled onto her hands and knees and distanced herself from the magical boy, turning around once she was a few feet away, “What the hell was that?” She was shaking uncontrollably as she rested back on the balls of her bare feet.

“Don’t--don’t over react, please, everyone over reacts,” he rose to his knees and moved himself towards her, a hand reaching out towards her shadowy figure just inches away. He just wanted her to stay, to not freak out like everyone else always did. He didn’t want her to leave, “Please.”

“No, no, don’t even come near me!” Miya jumped up and jogged over to the oak tree, hiding behind its large trunk. She popped her head around the side, “Leave, Opal!”

“Miya!” He wanted to hold her, explain to her what he could do, but she was gone just as his fingers brushed against the jagged bark of the oak, “Miya...” Her dark form could be seen scrambling down the hill and over to her house, the light from her open front door illuminating her pale face one last time before she disappeared inside.

It was days later when she received a sealed letter. The seal had a moon and star imprinted in its blue wax. She tore it open.

Miya,

I’m going to just say it: I can do things, unimaginable things. Like implanting images in people’s heads, teleporting, so many amazing things, but I’m not a bad person, I’m not one of the horrible people. Please, just let me show you some of what I can do. Meet me by the oak tonight. Please.

-Opal

She set the letter gently on her desk, her eyes moving to look out her small bedroom window. She could see the tree from here, a speck in the distance. There was a tiny figure leaning up against its trunk. That’s probably him, she thought as she fingered the corner of the paper. Slipping on her thin summer shoes, she left the house and made her way to the hill.

“I said night, Miya,” he spoke calmly, his back to her. She was standing at the base of the hill, just getting ready to climb up. With making almost no noise, she didn’t know how he knew she was here, and she wasn’t going to ask. It was probably one of his weird “powers” that he mentioned.

“Do you really think I trust you at all to meet you in the dark? Be happy that I’m here now,” It took her a second to climb the hill, but she was soon seated in front of him. He looked tired, worn out, with dark circles around his closed eyes. “So?”

“So,” he crossed his legs and leaned towards her, a hand held outward, palm up, eyes still shut. She looked down and moved to place her hand on his, but he shook his head, “Watch.” In the middle of his hand sprung up a green wisp of flame, his skin turning the color of the grass in its light. His eyes opened.

She stared in awe at the fire coming from his hand. He turned and touched the tree with the flame, a little black spot forming on its bark. That’s impossible, her head spun as the green faded and vanished, a small stream of smoke rising into the air, “How...”

“I don’t know,” he shut his hand into a fist, “I honestly don’t. I just know I have... powers. Or abilities, curses, whatever you want to call them.” He slumped back against the tree and closed his eyes once more, “I’m a freak.”

“No, don’t say that,” she adjusted herself so she was by his side, shoulder to shoulder in the same spot she ran into him just over seven years ago. She wasn’t scared of him anymore, she wanted to see what all he could do. “Do you remember--”

“I remember everything.”

She ignored his interruption, “You. It’s all because of you, do you know that? Me being here. I’ve almost been always alone since I was able to feed myself, I had no one. Until you. You made my little eleven-year-old self’s dream come true, I got to kiss the sky...”

His hand was on the back of her neck and pulling her in quicker than her brain could process, and soon their lips were pressed together softly, both of their eyes closed. His lips were warm and smooth; they sent tingles down her spine. It was her first kiss.

It only lasted a few short seconds. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t help myself,” He stood up and turned away from her. He ran a hand through his hair and set the other on his hip in contemplation, “I should go...”

“Opal,” That’s all Miya could say. She was frozen to the spot, the events of the last week finally crashing on her. The mystery, the wonder. The boy with the funny name and unbelievable powers. The boy that had saved her in more than one way.

“Come with me,” his words jolted her from her thoughts. “Please. And we can talk and be together and I can show you everything, please Miya, I don’t have anyone at home, and you--”

“Okay,” she looked down at her lap, shocked at her own tongue. Opal was something else, different than normal boys. Not because of his powers, just his overall personality. She was more attracted to him than anyone else she had ever met before. “Okay.” She reached out her hand, waiting for him to take it.

The smile on his face was larger than it had been in months, the tired look his countenance once possessed was gone. “Thank you,” he pulled her close to him and they vanished into thin air, a burn mark on the oak tree where they first met the only evidence that they were ever there. ♦

SIGN HERE, PLEASE

STEFFANI GENTRY **SHORT STORY**

The Cuyahoga County precinct office was quiet. The handful of Saturday night drunk and disorderlies had been processed smoothly through the system by the morning shift, and the scattered thunderstorms were making this an easy Sunday afternoon shift for Sergeant Buckingham. The only really pressing task he had to complete was the file for the man sitting in detention.

The sergeant sat shaking his head as he thought about the guy in lockup. He was a strange one, not the usual sort to show up in the precinct office for any reason other than to pick up an accident report. This was no ordinary criminal; that was for certain. He was polite and well groomed. And he hadn't shied away from looking any of the shift personnel at the precinct straight in the eye.

If he hadn't have been caught in the act of a crime, Bucky, as his friends called him, could have imagined having this guy for a neighbor, cracking open a few brews over the barbecue with him, maybe even hanging out at an Indians game.

The clock on the wall read 1:17 when Wallace Green was brought in for booking. Sgt. Buckingham had accompanied him into the larger of the precinct's two interview rooms and closed the door behind them.

"Have a seat," Bucky said, gesturing to a straight-backed chair. "My name is Sgt. Buckingham, and I'll be taking your statement. It says here your name is Green, Wallace Green. Is that correct?"

"Yessir."

"So, Mr. Green, let's hear what you have to say for yourself," prompted the sergeant.

"Well officer, it all went to hell, when this guy leaped into the room, aimed his Glock at my chest, and told me to drop the lobster."

"Excuse me?" Bucky said. "Are you referring to Officer Bailey, the man who arrested you?"

"Yessir. That's who. I tried to tell him I wasn't there stealing anything, but he wouldn't listen. He just kept talking about how anything I said could be used against me. All I wanted was to tell him what happened, that's all."

"Well, Mr. Green, that's what I'm here for, so why don't you start at the beginning and tell me what happened."

Wallace took a deep breath. "It all started last Tuesday," he began. "I was at home. I'm laid off from my job at the concrete plant, and this delivery van pulls up in my driveway. So I go and answer the door, and this guy's got this big box for my next door neighbor. I guess my neighbor wasn't home, and he asked me if I'd mind signing for the package so he wouldn't have to swing by again later. So I told him okay, and I signed for the package."

"Were you home alone," asked the sergeant.

"Yeah. It was just me. I live alone now, ever since my wife Ellen ran off."

"And do you know what was in the package that you signed for?"

"Sure I do. It was a case of wine. I guess this guy belongs to some fancy wine of the month club, and he gets like a whole case of wine delivered to his door every month. Man, that's the life, ain't it? Somebody bringing wine right to your door!"

"And then?"

"Well the delivery guy told me he left a note on the door to let him know who signed for the package. So I went over, just to make sure the note was there."

"And was the note on the door when you arrived?" asked Bucky.

"Yessir. The note was on the door, right next to the ADP sticker."

"Did your neighbor return and come to get his wine?"

"No sir. I think the guy's on some kind of trip or something. I haven't seen him home for a week or so. But that's okay, I just left the box sitting right there by my front door. I usually go in and out the garage anyway. I got to admit, that wine sitting there was a temptation every now and then, but I didn't drink any. I mean money's a little tight right now what with being laid off and all. Besides, I don't think a nice Pinot Noir is really going to pair up that well with hot dogs and fried potatoes, you know what I mean?"

Bucky nodded.

"So then Friday gets there and there's another delivery van in my drive. This time it's a big white styrofoam cooler kind of box, and the delivery guy is telling me that the stuff inside will only keep for a day or so because of how it's packed and would I mind signing for the delivery for my neighbor. What the hell? I already have the guy's wine, so I said sure."

"And do you know what was in this delivery?" Bucky asked.

Wallace paused for a moment and gave a plastic smile, the kind that never gets past your mouth and out to the rest of your face. "Sure," he said. "It was a delivery from Kansas City Steaks, a couple dozen bacon-wrapped filets."

"How did you know exactly what was in the box?"

"Well it was a pretty big box, and if my neighbor didn't get back soon I was going to have to figure out how to store the steaks. My freezer is pretty small and it's jammed full of those pot pies, you know the cheap ones you get from the bulky store for 75 cents each when you buy them by the dozen. Anyway, since I didn't have any room in my freezer I went around to some of the neighbors to see if anybody could store the steaks."

"But how did you know exactly what was in the box?"

"I'm getting there. So before I went around to the other neighbors I figured I'd need to be able to tell them how much freezer room they'd need, so I opened up the cooler box. And that's when I saw that it was three boxes of bacon-wrapped filets. Each box had a dozen. So I

figured I’d ask each neighbor if they could take just one box, so nobody was completely clogged up with this guy’s gourmet food.”

“So you gave your one neighbor’s steaks to three other neighbors?”

“No, no, no. Nobody would take them. Kenny, the guy across the street told me no way he was going to do anything to help that guy, because he was a motherfucking snob, always driving around in that ragtop Porsche of his and making us poor working stiff’s feel worthless. Kenny’s not a bad guy. He got laid off just like me, seven months ago and he’s having a hard time making ends meet what with his kids and all. So I just went on to the lady next door.”

“What’s her name?”

“I’m not sure. It’s Harmony, or Melody, or some kinda hippy dippy name like that.”

“And Harmony, or Melody, wouldn’t take the steaks either?”

“Nope. She told me she couldn’t poison her freezer environment with red meat because it would interfere with her Chakras or some other bullshit. She’s a Vegan. I guess there’s nothing wrong with that. I sure couldn’t do it. I like me a good steak from time to time. I can’t argue that it’s working for her. She’s got a smoking body. She goes out in her yard at sunrise and does some kinda Tai Chi or something, and she really rocks a pair of yoga pants,” he said with a lewd wink.

“So my last chance is to try the young couple that just moved in two houses down from me, the ones with all the save-the-whales stickers on their bumper.”

“And why wouldn’t they take the steaks?”

“I guess they liked the guy, and didn’t mind helping him out, but their freezer was already full of popsicles. They have three young kids, and I guess the popsicles are cheaper by the case lot and all. Nice young couple. I sat down, had a glass of Koolaid, and visited for a while. She’s a stay-at-home mom and sees just about everything as she sits on her front step watching her kids play in the sprinkler. You know what she told me? Why she told me that Mr. Foodandwine gets lobster grams once a month. LOBSTER GRAMS! I never even heard of such a thing. I mean, steak, wine AND lobster all delivered to the house!”

“So then what did you do?” prodded the sergeant.

“Well I don’t really know any of the other neighbors, so I didn’t have anyone else I could ask so I went home. It was getting on into the evening and I wanted to watch my Friday night shows. Them steaks weren’t going anywhere and the delivery guy said they’d be good for another day or so. So while I was watching TV I got to thinking I oughtta take those steaks outta the cooler box and put them in my fridge. At least the fridge is colder than my house is. That’s when I realized I hadn’t put the lid on the cooler box real good and all the dry ice was gone.”

Bucky shook his head just slightly and asked, “Were the steaks still frozen?”

“Mostly,” Wallace replied. “But they weren’t the hard little hockey pucks like when I first opened them. They were starting to soften up around the edges. So I

hurried up and got ‘em all put into my fridge, right next to the eggs, before I went to bed for the night.”

“What did you do on Saturday?” Bucky asked leaning into the table. It was getting to be close to his dinner break and all this talk about steaks was making him so hungry he was afraid his stomach was going to start growling right there in the interview room.

“Well the first thing I thought about when I woke up on Saturday was those stupid steaks. So I went to the fridge to check on them. They sure did look nice and tasty there next to them eggs. It’d been a long time since I’d had steak and eggs for breakfast, I can tell you that.

“So did you cook one for breakfast with some eggs?” asked Bucky subconsciously licking his lips.

“Absolutely not, sir,” Wallace exclaimed. Sure I’m down on my luck and don’t have enough money to pay my bills or eat fancy food, but I’m no thief I tell you. I closed the fridge and went to my front window to see if the guy’s Porsche was in his drive.

“Was it?”

“Nossir. So I went back into my kitchen and got a couple of those eggs out that were sitting next to those beautiful looking steaks, and I cooked them up for my breakfast. But you know, sarge, plain eggs just don’t taste as good when you know there’s steak sitting right there.”

The sergeant and Wallace sat silent for a moment, both of them salivating just a bit thinking about the flavor of a nice juicy steak.

Startled out of their reverie by the ringing of a telephone in the office next door, Wallace said, “That’s how

I spent most of my Saturday, going back and forth from checking them steaks in the fridge to peeking out front to see if Mr. Gourmet Delivery was home. By the time supper time came I couldn’t hardly think about anything but steak.”

“Did you give in and cook one?” asked Bucky after taking a pull from his water bottle in the hopes of tricking his stomach into thinking it wasn’t empty.

“No, sir. I did not.”

Bucky shook his head. “Mr. Green, I do believe you might possess more willpower than I would have under the circumstances. But perhaps you better finish your story.”

“Well, as I was saying, supper time came and I wanted one of them steaks so bad, but I got out a pot pie instead, and that’s when it all started to go downhill. I was just sitting down to eat my turkey pot pie at the kitchen table, and that damned case of wine was just sitting right there by the door where I could see it. I was really starting to get irritated about how much trouble I was going through over this neighbor who hardly even says hello. And then I got to thinking, that guy couldn’t very well get mad at me if one of them bottles sorta accidentally broke when I was moving the box that was still cluttering up my doorway. He’d never know the bottle didn’t really break. And my turkey pot pie would sure taste a helluva lot better if I was washing it down with a nice glass of wine. What the heck, he owes me at least a bottle of wine for taking care of all this gourmet stuff for him.”

Sergeant Buckingham showed no reaction as he listened to Wallace.

“So that’s when I did it. I opened up a bottle of that fancy wine and drank a glass with my turkey pot pie, and then I settled in with a second glass to watch some TV. “

“Were you still checking the steaks and your neighbor’s driveway periodically?” Bucky prodded.

“Nah. The steaks were already completely thawed. They hadn’t been even the littlest bit frozen for two or three hours by then. And when the evening started cooling off, I opened up my front window so I’d hear if old fancy pants pulled into his driveway. So after about three glasses of that wine, I started thinking about the things my neighbors had told me and all those Lobster Grams Susie Yogapants mentioned. That’s when I started noticing Red Lobster commercials. Have you ever noticed how sometimes all the commercials on TV start being about things you’re thinking of? “

“I really was being a good neighbor, holding onto this guy’s stuff for him and all. Lots of guys would have just had at it with this guy’s steaks and wine, but not me, no siree, not Wallace E. Green. And what kind of a good neighbor is this Mr. Fancy Food? Why Kenny was telling me how the guy wouldn’t even crack open his wallet to buy some candy his kids were selling to buy uniforms for their little league team. So that’s when I decided to open the second bottle of wine. I wasn’t getting drunk or anything, just trying to take the edge off that was building up about this guy.”

The sergeant sat quiet for a minute, and then said, “But how did you come to be in your neighbor’s kitchen Sunday morning?”

“Well,” Wallace said glancing at the door on his left, “I kept drinking that wine and watching night owl movies all night long, keeping just a little buzz going. And

then somewhere about eleven o’clock Sunday morning Red Lobster started running these commercials, had to been every ten minutes, about their lobster tails this and their lobster bake that. Every ten minutes I tell you. It was like some kind of message. Then some old commercial jingle started playing in my head over and over. ‘You deserve a break today. You deserve a break today.’ And that’s when I had my great idea!”

“What great idea?” Bucky asked skeptically.

“I could stop all this madness by jimmying open this guy’s window, taking his steaks into his house and putting them in his freezer.”

“So that’s what you were doing in your neighbor’s house?” asked the sergeant.

“That’s what I was doing in my neighbor’s house.”

“I just have one last question for you, Mr. Green,” Sgt. Buckingham said gravely. “Why did the arresting officer tell you to drop the lobster?”

Wallace glanced across at the sergeant with a look of mild confusion on his face. “Well he… I…” He cleared his throat and reached out a shaking hand for the glass of water that sat on the table and took a quick sip. “He told me to drop the lobs…” his voice trailed off as confusion turned to panic in his eyes. He sat there, mouth agape, as his head sunk to the table.

Sgt. Buckingham watched, as Wallace’s shoulders began to shake with silent sobs. Standing up, he muttered awkwardly, “I’ll just go get this statement typed up.” Then he quietly exited the interview room, leaving Wallace and his conscience alone together. As the sergeant sat typing

up the last of Mr. Green’s statement, the shift commander happened by and sat down at Bucky’s desk.

“Hey, hey!” the commander chuckled. “I just got the priors report from our good friends at the state capital. Looks like our Mr. Green had some trouble in Portage County two years ago. It seems he was caught trying to steal a parcel of food from a neighbor’s porch. Looks like the D.A. didn’t press charges though, because Mr. Green swore that he had received the package for his neighbor, and was on their porch leaving the package for them, not taking it. What’s he done now?”

Bucky sat there at his desk with his boss and related the whole story from start to finish.

“So do you think we’ve got a case here?” asked the commander.

The sergeant just sat there nodding his head as he started to laugh.

“You wanna let me in on your little joke there, Bucky?” asked the shift commander impatiently.

“He forgot to bring the steaks.” ♦

THE QUEEN AND THE SUCCUBUS

NATHANIEL RYAN **SHORT STORY**

There is a statue, 20 miles downriver from where Lake Huron relinquishes her ghosts. The statue is the likeness of a young woman, perhaps in her mid-twenties, and she is forever waving at the sailors of the freighters that slink down the St. Clair River. There is no plaque, no description that explains her perpetual state of saying goodbye; or is it hello? I suppose that's the purpose of some things, to remain undefined. But supposing always just makes me think of happy clips of time and the girl that once was the queen of my soul. She was sixteen when we met and I was seventeen. It was the summer after high school, a period of time for which I will always contend is the gods' personal vendetta against the human race. Those months were sublime, and they clung to us like droplets of condensation on a cold glass of water. There was a beach, there were sunsets and sunrises, there were brilliant stars that cast their histories to our eyes. There were us and our friends. I still remember the first night I slept next to her. Her strawberry blonde hair splayed out

on the pillow, her big brown eyes blinking against the darkness, her laughter, which I would fall in love with and pursue on its own account, hung in the humid air above our heads. I was lying next to the following five years of my life.

In present times, the statue has become a comfort to me. In the rare lapses of time that I am home, I visit her, the statue. From the parking lot, to the coffee shop, dodge sparse traffic across the road, down the boardwalk, sit on the bench. It's easier to think she's saying goodbye. Not happier, just easier. While happy thoughts may hang in the mind pleasantly, they rarely exercise permanence. It is the sad things that last, that warrant and encourage prolonged contemplation.

But rock'n'roll is neither a sad or happy thing. Rock'n'roll is long miles, late nights and black coffee. Rock'n'roll is playing loud music in sweaty basements and drinking cheap beer. Above all these things, though,

it is sacrifice. If it is not sacrifice, it is but an empty muse. It's an obsession that is to be loved, it is a mistress, it is something you only give all to. I've seen those who didn't give everything to her and they are sad creatures. Then again, so are those of us who have sold our souls to that red-headed Succubus. The difference is our sweat drips on microphones and stomp boxes; theirs pools on babies and heavy, wood desks. I devoted my life to her, much to my conservative parents' dismay. I devoted my life to the buzzing basements and the long miles that lead to them. The Succubus is a jealous thing. She consumes the soul, all for herself. Devil falls in love with devil (Does it matter who is who?). When a love such as this is pure, the two become the same. Sacrifice.

Today I visit my friend, the statue. Parking lot, coffee shop, dodge cars, boardwalk. The steps are familiar and comfortable. She is familiar and comfortable, and also sad. Her open-mouthed smile says she is happy, but that tentative step she is taking betrays it. Her right knee is bent at a gentle angle, its corresponding heel hovering maybe four inches above the ground. If I were feeling particularly dismantled, I might emblazon some profanity in big bright letters on the bottom of that foot. I doubt she'd mind.

These uncommon days at home are long and unavailing. I'm sure it is a failure on my part, but their only function is to consume their allotted time, twenty-four hours each. Get me on the damn road, already. I consider myself patient; a four-hour turn at the wheel feels like a turn of the page to me. The highways, the fast food, the music, the strangers, they kiss and numb the brain. But these stupid days that I spend accompanied by statues and useless, high school-era friends, they slide into the river, muffled, and drag me along with

them. So I'll mope around for a while. Sometimes I'll drive just so I'm moving. A musician on the road falls into a rhythm of constant change. Though the specific notes are rarely the same, there still remains a motif of metamorphosis. The events of the day are never the same as its predecessor, such as the traveler is also not. Then the traveler is home, and everything stops moving. They look out the window expecting blurred buildings and trees, and instead see a lawn that needs to be mowed. It's more jarring than you'd think. It's also the kind of purposeless struggle only the emotionally tumultuous engage in. I'm waiting for everything to blur again. It stays pleasant that way.

Early afternoon the following day, we're crossing the state line into Ohio. Tap the brake, let the speedometer drop five notches, hit the cruise control again. The bastards in charge of this state want us to spend as much time here as possible. In the passenger seat, my guitarist is raising his phone to take a picture of a barn with "GUNS EXIT 69" blaring in big white letters. It's funny, at least I think so. Just like home. I'm waiting for a rusty F-150 to pass so I can observe the confederate flag that will inevitably be plastered on the rear windshield, possibly joined by a bumper sticker condemning minorities that this redneck fuck's great-grandparents were almost certain to be akin to. Just like home.

Dylan is my friend. He is the bassist of a band that my band has played with many times, including tonight, and I am holding back his long, greasy hair as his vomit streaks across the sidewalk. The vomit is intermittently interrupted by a "fuck" or "shit".

"Let it out, man. Pretend it's a demon and you're

Emily Rose or some shit.”

“....fuck...goddamn...”

These conversations are always engaging. His stomach heaves in unison with my rejections of the clarity.

There’s a Ford Focus parked on this side of the street. A Red Wings sticker on the bumper and my head starts to rattle, shakes me back two years ago. I’m in the passenger seat, the Queen of my soul is at the wheel. 696, headed towards Ann Arbor, rich kid and hipster hub of West-side Michigan. She was pissed at me because I was late (I’m always late). It didn’t help we were in a small car, the backseat filled with backpacks and duffel bags and pillows.

“Why can’t you just be on time? Jesus, you ruin everything.”

She’s glaring red-faced at the oncoming pavement, frequently glancing in mirrors and changing lanes, speeding up and slowing down. The Detroit traffic is a war zone that reflects all the bloody shades of the one inside this car. Now I’m checking my mirrors and changing lanes. I am calm and cool-minded. When it comes to this girl, I am a goddamn bomb disposal artist. Most couples have at least one (bomb disposal artist). If they didn’t, they would blow up long before they got married and had kids and learned to hate each other and fought over the divorce settlement. This particular bomb, my Queen, just needs breakfast, coffee and puns. I’m not kidding, all I have to do is butter her up. If I didn’t I’d be toast. It has solved a latte of problems, like the one we’re having right now, driving down the espresso way.

Bomb disposal artist.

If you’ve ever been with someone longer than a few years, you know what I’m talking about. You learn every nook and cranny of their psyche, and it’s always the stupid shit like idiotic puns that save your ass.

“You know buying me breakfast isn’t gonna make me any less mad at you, right?”, she says with her mouth full of French toast. Lady-like ladies don’t talk with their mouths full, but my Queen isn’t a lady-like lady, she’s a tenacious type who gets shit done.

“I’m sure it won’t, hon.”

She knows it will. I’m assured that I’m in the clear when she hands me the keys. She hates driving. The only time she overcomes her detest for the wheel is when I’ve made her mad. In the passenger seat now, she softens. This is the girl who demands the entirety of my admiration.

“Sorry I was late, hon. Lucky for me, I’m handsome and forgivable.”

“Yeah, okay, keep telling yourself that. How late were you up last night?”

Band practice had kept me into the more distant hours of the night. A small wave of alcohol kept me later still.

“Oh, not that late.” I tend to sleep more than most people. In my most narcissistic of states, I believe it’s because I think more than the average bear and therefore require an excess of rest. Realistic me, who offers only rare appearances, and the general public would probably call bullshit and say that I just need to

learn to get my ass out of bed.

“Bullshit. You stayed up late, didn’t you?” The words sound harsh, but her tone indicates something that resembles forgiveness. I fake nervously scratching the back of my head and she laughs.

“Whatever”, she says, “at least you didn’t crash your car on the way here.” She’s always worried I’m going to get in an accident. I totaled one car, one time, and apparently it warrants an infinite state of concern. She’s persistent, to say the least.

The streets of Ann Arbor are a bizarre and impossible monstrosity, at least to a small town dweller like myself. For one thing, there are people. Outside. Walking. What’s more, there are places to walk to. Not the unemployed ambling that the folks back home use to reach their...destinations? Here they’re walking to classes, coffee shops, record stores, clothing outlets... things that don’t belong in our usually small world. The Queen is less impressed than I. She goes to a university in the ruins of the Motor City. There are destinations there, with activity and diversity that buzz between them. “Take a left at Liberty.”, the Queen directs, with her attention intently shifting from the road to the glitchy blue line on her cell phone. Those things make me feel like Donnie Darko, with our future path pouring from our chest. Hood? I’m getting distracted.

“Liberty?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. You want me to drive?”

She asks not only because she’s frustrated and knows I suck with directions, but because she’s conscientious of the fact that I despise city driving. Give me endless

stretches of freeway, but please, for the love of Joey Ramone, don’t make me navigate these crazy little streets that go this way and that and then “Holy shit!” you need to get in the turn lane now because there’s another crazy little street you need to be on.

“Naw, I’m good.”

I’ll get carsick if I have to stare at that blue line. My stomach will churn if I have to set my sight on *exactly* where we’ll be going and how we’ll get there. Donnie Darko is a cliché now, anyway.

“These streets are a bit more tame than the Detroit DMZ...”, I say offhandedly.

“Yeah, I guess so. You’re gonna be a pansy-ass about it either way, I know that.”

“You’re damn right, I will. Screw this noise.”

There’s a Starbucks on every other, if not every, block. That’s how you know you’re in a safe place. The plastic-groovy cafes staffed by the plaster-faced baristas are like beacons of hope, sending signals of peace offering. I don’t even like their coffee, but the chain gives me warm fuzzies in such an unfamiliar urban torturescape.

The Weakerthans are a Canadian punk band that formed in the late ‘90s. In 2000, they released an album called *Left and Leaving*. In 2009, I met the Queen of my soul, and in 2012 we pointed her Ford Focus South and slid down the East Michigan coastline. I don’t know why she and I liked driving so much. I’ve had some theories. I think I made her feel impulsive and adventurous. She made me feel safe inside my head.

Drawing impressive late fees from the local library, *Left and Leaving* played on repeat in the car stereo the entirety of that day. Now in 2013, I bought that record for myself in the buzzing city of Ann Arbor. The Queen always worried that I spent too much money (I did spend too much money). I didn't tell her I bought that record because it reminded me of her smiling and laughing in the passenger seat. People tend not to say important things like that. Instead: "My phone sucks." "Did you catch the game last night?" "Check out this band, they're getting really popular." "Watch this short video of something that will have little to no impact on your life but fits the bill for your pathetically short attention span." / etc. And then eventually the people you should have said the important things to are no longer a part of your life. My Queen bought a sunhat that was on sale. She really got a kick out of finding good deals.

We were in and out of shops, bars and diners. I'm not sure I could list the name of a single establishment that we patronized that day, except for Ashley's Bar (Eighty beers on tap is a memorable sight to behold). The majority of the trip is a blur, and not because of Ashley's. It doesn't really matter, what we do. It's all just a hazy smear of meaningless bullshit. But she is there, sexy in her blue dress with small, white flowers, cute in her sunhat, complex and interesting as company and conversation. This appears vivid in the hazy smear. She is radiant, but also cold and sharp. She is witty and funny, but also kind enough to laugh at my lame jokes. Her attendance made the journey worthwhile, not the exciting city. Fuck the city. It is empty and full of empty people; emptiness at least so far as what they offer to me. Useless might be the better word. They were water

running down the Detroit River, and my Queen and I were Belle Isle. In the morning, the freeway we saw the day before breathed different. There were jobs and classes that loomed on the horizon, regardless of our direction. It was the honest to goodness future, not the comfortable curtain that we'd hide our eyes behind on those long drives. It was late night fights and Canadian punk bands and real decisions and jobs and Ph. D's and sweaty basements, but right then she was in the passenger seat and laughing, still there in Michigan where I could reach out and hold her hand, and then I'm back on the sidewalk with the citric aroma of stomach acid invading my brain. What a welcome back. Fitting.

From the front porch, "Hey is he alright?"

"I assure you, he's never been better."

"....shit....fuck..." (Dylan's contribution to the conversation.)

I'm not the one who left for a fucking Ph. D. I'm not the only one who tried, either. It was just cold geography that steered our aimless driving towards a cliff. And when we hit the bottom and her Focus exploded in cinematic flames, she was at a university in Los Angeles and I ended up at this house on this night, holding back Dylan's hair.

It's not very rock'n'roll to regret decisions, so I won't, I fucking won't. Instead, my environment will soak up my inner conflict. I'll rip the strings off my guitar, I'll throw the mic to the cement floor, I'll tear my body to shreds to smooth the edges, when everything stops moving and ceases to be a convenient, easy blur. We drove here in a thirteen-passenger van, filled with empty coffee cups and dirty clothes that only lend

themselves to the gravity of the decisions I have made. And while I am here, on this sidewalk with Dylan, I am filled with only love for what I do. The sweat soaked in my shirt, the hoarseness of my voice, the aching muscles in my back; they fill every crater in my chest. But on the road, my skull rattles. The Succubus is a demon that fulfills men's wildest dreams at night, and in the morning she leaves them to watch their failures flash beneath with the lines on the freeway. I don't sleep well when we're on the road, which means I hardly sleep at all, but sometimes I dream of my Queen and the Succubus. They are standing face to face at the railing of a ship. They are incompatible and confrontational. Neither makes a move to strike the other, but the air between them is tense. Then the ship rocks and they are thrown overboard. I am there now and I reach my dreamhand to one...both of them? The Succubus latches on and her nails dig into my arm. My Queen looks at me with those big, brown eyes. She stares into my skull and the dreamworld lurches, holds still. Blood is now beginning to drip down my arm. My Queen begins to cry and I hate myself for the day I was born. I have let her down. I'm not entirely sure how, but I did. It's not like I didn't reach to her as well. But then, I don't know if I could save them both. The dream always ends here, but the feeling never leaves. This feeling, this is rock'n'roll. This is my sacrifice to the Succubus. It's the horizon itself, the theoretical future that bodes well only for ghosts. Dylan drags his forearm across his lips. A car honks, passes. In his empty, drunken state, Dylan waves. I wonder, in his brain currently submerged in the warm confines of alcohol, if he was saying hello or goodbye. ♦

LOVE ALWAYS, X

MARISSA JESSEE **SHORT STORY**

The blaring of a train’s horn was what I woke to on a nightly basis. Around two o’clock every night nearly on the dot. Unfortunately, tonight was no different. I sat up groggily and rubbed my eyes before glancing over at the clock. It was two a.m., of course. The locals all said that it wouldn’t take long to get used to the endless streams of trains minutes from my doorstep. If that was the case then why after two months did I still notice every single one? I sighed heavily and threw my legs over the side of the bed, I was awake now so I might as well get a snack. Slowly and without turning on the lights, I trudged to the refrigerator. I knew there was nothing I would want inside, but I stood and gazed over the shelves for several minutes anyway. Once I was satisfied knowing that there was nothing in the fridge that I wanted, I shut the door and started to turn away. That’s when something caught my eye. It was an envelope on the fridge door held in place with an old magnet. It was mostly blank, except for small writing on the back that read “To Emily”.

My brother Max had been by earlier that evening, so I figured he had probably thrown it on the door when I wasn’t looking. I slid my finger under the flap of the envelope when a twinge of pain pulsed through my finger. Blood trickled from the fresh cut as I swore to myself. I sucked on the cut to stop the bleeding, while I finished sloppily opening the letter with my other hand. I turned it

upside down and shook it to release its contents. Out fell a clear plastic snack bag, and a folded piece of paper. I picked up the plastic bag first, I could barely see its contents in the darkness of the room, so walked over and flicked on the light before investigating further. In it were short black hairs with some scalp still attached. Disgusted I quickly threw the baggy into the waste bin. I scrambled to pick up the crumpled letter on the counter. What the hell was wrong with Max? He knew I was already weary about living in the country by myself, what was he thinking leaving me something this creepy? A whirl of anger rushed over me as I unfolded the letter, and read it quietly to myself.

Dear Emily,

I hope you enjoy my gift! It was hard to find a girl with a shade close

to yours, but I did my best. You’re so sweet, I know you’ll love it. I

hope you have a great Christmas sweet Emily, I’m sure I’ll see you again.

Love Always,

X

That’s it. Max was dead! I threw the letter away before rushing to my room to grab my cellphone. My fingers shook with fury as I typed his number into the screen and waited for him to pick up the phone. It rang five times before a ring was cut off and I could hear the phone being picked up. Max’s voice was groggy, you could tell the phone call had woken him up. “Hello?” He grumbled tiredly.

I couldn’t hold back my anger any longer, and I started yelling at him nearly incoherently. He went silent for a minute before interrupting my rant. “Emily, Emily stop talking for a second. What in the hell are you talking about?” I stopped for a moment, and I could feel more anger pulsing through me at his response.

“Don’t play dumb with me!” I screamed at him, my anger thrusting me back on my feet. I paced back and forth as I explained to him, slower but no quieter, about what he had done.

He waited for me to finish this time, taking a few moments to respond. “Emily, I have no idea what you’re talking about. I didn’t leave you a letter.”

I stopped pacing and crawled back onto my bed. “Max stop being childish I’m serious, okay? It wasn’t funny now just fess up to it and apologize so I can go back to bed.”

I could hear him sit up as he sighed heavily. “Emily I’m not joking, I really didn’t leave you anything. Trust me if I did I would just tell you so I could go back to bed.. Look if it’ll make you feel better I’ll come over, okay?”

He was still lying, he had to be, who else could’ve left that letter on the fridge? All the doors were locked and I live in the middle of no where. “No. We’ll talk about this in the morning. I suggest you get your story straight because I know you did it.” I hung up the phone before he could respond, and threw it onto the nightstand, mumbling to

myself about how irritating he was.

The night seemed to crawl by. Sleep evaded me as all I could think about was that letter. Were those hairs human? That’s disgusting...No they couldn’t have been, where would Max, a blonde, even get it? I tossed and turned for hours just thinking about the possibility that it really may not have been Max that wrote the letter.

The next morning did eventually come, but it wasn’t met with anticipation. I rolled out of bed to the sound of the doorbell, walking unenthusiastically to open the door. Max looked me up and down then sighed quietly. “Sis, you look like hell.”

I held the door open for him as he walked into the house, then shut and locked it behind him. “Gee thanks.” Max followed me as I walked into the kitchen and sat on a stool at the island.

Instead of sitting down Max opted to stand on the other side of the Island, leaning against the countertop. “So tell me from the beginning, what happened?” He said quietly, his voice concerned. My gaze shifted and I reluctantly explained everything to him. My eyes traveled back to his face and the more I examined it I realized that he really wasn’t the one that wrote the letter.

“You threw it away? In which trashcan? I want to see it.”

I pointed to the waste bin off the side of the island then layed my head on top of my folded arms on the countertop. My moment of peace was short lived as Max got my attention. “Are you sure you threw it away in this trashcan?” I shot up off the counter and looked at him.

“Why? what’s wrong?” Part of me already knew the answer, so I got off the stool and walked over next to him, looking into the trashcan. It was full of food wrappers and

miscellaneous trash but there was no letter or plastic bag, it was all gone. I could feel my heart drop into my stomach and I had to grab ahold of the countertop to hold steady. “I-It was there I swear! I put it right there!”

Max put his hand on my arm. “Emily calm down. I’m sure you put it somewhere else and just forgot.” His words were of no comfort. I know I put it there, I may have been angry but I remember what I did with it. His words broke my panicked thoughts. “Emily go grab some of your things I want you to stay with me for the next few nights, alright?” My mind was still focused on the fact the letter and it’s contents were gone, but I managed a nod before staggering off to my room.

Sloppily tossing things into a small suitcase, I had a thousand thoughts going through my mind at once. I accidentally dropped a shirt on the ground and bent over to pick it up. A light swift breeze tickled my skin as I stood back up. My gaze jerked around to the window, it was open a crack letting in the crisp winter air. I quickly shut the window, and called out for Max. I never had my window open, the trains around here were so loud and I was never a fan of them to begin with. The windows in this house were always shut. Always.

Max slowly walked into the room. “Max my window was open.. my window is never open! You know that.” I trailed off when I turned to him and his face was just as disturbed as mine was. “..what? what is it?!” He slowly lifted his arm to me, he was holding a white envelope.

He looked at me, and it seemed as though he had just seen a ghost. “This was taped to your bathroom mirror, Emily.” I looked at the envelope horrified, and snatched it from his hands, furiously ripping it open and pulling out a letter. I read it aloud so Max could hear it.

Emily,

I let it go when you ignored me in person. I know how modest you can be, so I understood when you didn’t want to show your affection for me in public. But to ignore my gift to you in the privacy of your home? I just don’t understand Emily, why did you throw my letter away? I thought we had something special, but you’re just like the rest of them. I know you don’t want me.. but if I can’t have you, nobody can.

Love Always,

X

Every cell in my body started to shake, whoever was writing these letters had been in my house last night. While I was sitting up awake there was someone in my house. I nearly jumped out of my skin when Max grabbed my arm. “Emily snap out of it! We’re leaving, right now and I’m calling the police.” I nodded slowly, my mind a haze. Max grabbed my suitcase and pulled me outside to the car.

He insisted that I ride with him, but after a few minutes my mind cleared and I felt perfectly capable to drive my own car. This psycho just forced me out of my own house I’d be damned if I let him get my car too. Max finally realized his persistence was failing, and agreed to let me take my car. He led the way to his house and once we got there he helped me take my things into the house. Once everything was settled, Max called the sheriffs department and explained everything that had happened. They listened but we were told a stalker case isn’t really something they put on the top of their priority list. It was then I realized there may be a time that we would have to take matters into our own hands.

Max and I spent the rest of the day sitting in silence. Neither of us really sure what to say. By the time night rolled around I managed to express to him that I wasn’t comfortable sleeping in a room by myself, so he gave me his bed to sleep in, and brought the mattress from the guest bedroom to lay on the floor. The thought was nice, but I knew even with him there sleep would not come easy for me any time soon.

Several sleepless nights passed before I was finally feeling up to moving into the guest room, alone. There had been no more letters, and everything seemed to be getting back to normal. I had already planned on attending school the next day. After everything that happened, I had been falling behind in my classes at college and if nothing else, my motivation was to stop “X” from controlling my life. If I failed this semester then I was letting him win.

That next morning I woke up to the sun shining on my face, I had actually gotten a decent nights sleep. Sitting up, I threw my legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. I could feel that today was going to be a better day. I didn’t feel as afraid as I had before, something was different about today. After I got dressed I joined Max in the kitchen for some breakfast, I sat at the table while I watched him cook.

“I think I’m going to go to school today.” I avoided eye contact with him, because I knew what he was going to think.

“Really? Are you sure that’s a good idea, Emily?” I could feel his gaze on me as I played with the placemat on the table.

“Yes I’m sure. I’m already three class periods behind if I miss anymore I’m going to fail this semester.”

My gaze moved to him as he sighed and folded over

his omelette. “Fine, but let me tell you I don’t think that this is a good idea, Emily.” He looked up from his skillet to meet my gaze, his face stern. “If something weird happens, I don’t care how small you might think it is, you call me. Understand?”

A small smile stretched across my lips as I stood up and walked over to him. “Alright, I’ll call I promise.” Max wrapped his arms around me tightly, just like when we were kids. I always felt safe when I was with him, and I had never been more thankful for that than I was right now. “Thank you, Max.” He kissed my head before holding my face in his hands and looking me in the eye.

“You’re my sister, Emily. It’s my job to protect you.” He moved his hand to the top of my head, and messed up my hair before turning back to his omelette. “Just be careful.”

We ate breakfast in a content silence. When we were finished I gathered my stuff for school and left. The drive to school was long and I couldn’t help but start to feel a little bit anxious. I was about three quarters of the way there when my check engine light came on. I took a mental note of it, but decided I would get it checked out tomorrow, since I wouldn’t be home until after dark.

My classes seemed to drag on forever, I never realized how much material we could cover in three class periods. I felt like I was getting further and further behind and I couldn’t will myself to pay attention. Occasionally, I thought back to the second letter I received from X, “I let it go when you ignored me in person. I know how modest you can be, so I understood when you didn’t want to show your affection for me in public.” What did he mean by that..? I then started to wonder if he attended school with me, and I could feel my skin crawling. No there’s no way, I don’t even talk to anyone at school. That idea was quickly abandoned as I realized that I was spending more time thinking about X than I was to my professors.

The day went by relatively uneventful but I kept more to myself than usual. I found that I was suspicious of everyone I saw in passing. For the first time I noticed everyone, but no one seemed to be noticing me and I was finally feeling safe again.

It was starting to get dark when I walked out to my car following my final class. I had always thought that one of the benefits of having a later class was that by the time it ended campus had pretty much cleared out. However, now it was just giving me the creeps. The sidewalks were empty and my only company was the snow falling from the sky. An eerie feeling crept over me, and I kept looking back over my shoulder to ensure that I was alone. I fiddled with my keys before finally getting in the car and locking the door. Shortly after throwing my backpack in the backseat and getting situated I started the car. I was about to set my purse on the floor when I noticed an envelope laying on passenger seat. That same familiar handwriting, “To Emily.” My heart jumped out of my chest as I checked the back seat frantically for any trespassers. The car was empty but my heart didn’t slow as I reached over and picked it up, reading the letter inside.

Dear Emily,

I’m glad to see you around again. I lost track of you for a few days, but don’t worry I didn’t forget about you my love. Tonight is the night we will be joined in eternity together.

Love Always,

X

My throat fell into my stomach as I could feel it twisting and turning into knots. The blood in my veins seemed to get thicker and I could feel every cell in my body. I was stupid for thinking that it could have been over. Of course it wasn’t over. I threw the letter onto the floor and slammed my car into drive, heading back to Max’s house. I felt safe there and I knew Max could protect me. I pulled out of the parking lot and sped down the road, going well over the speed limit. My hands shook and my lungs felt tighter and tighter with each passing moment. I reached down to grab my phone out of my purse, glancing away from the road for a split second. When I looked back up again I had to jerk back the steering wheel to avoid running off the shoulder. “Come on Emily get it together.” I mumbled to myself, dialing Max’s number into my phone. I swerved off again but this time my phone slipped out of my hand and into the floor on the passenger side.

“Damnit!” I regained my position in the road and carefully tried reaching over to grab it, taking my eyes off the road for fifteen seconds at the most. After realizing I couldn’t reach the phone without unbuckling my seatbelt, I sat back up straight and looked at the road. Subsequently, I screamed and slammed on my breaks. A person, a man? Standing in the middle of the road, what an idiot! I probably could have stopped in time but the snow that had melted and refrozen on the road had created ice patches. There was no way I could stop in time. To avoid hitting him, I violently jerked the steering wheel off to the shoulder losing control of the car. The ice sent it spinning out of control and it hit something causing my head to collide with the side window and everything to become a slow motion blur. It didn’t stop sliding for what seemed like forever, but with a loud thump it came to an abrupt stop and I wasn’t sure what had just happened.

I could feel something trickling down the side of my face. I reached up and touched it with my finger, only to see the

thick crimson liquid. A light shined through the passenger window, it was nearly blinding and I had to cover my eyes. It was a car? Good maybe they could help me.

Then I heard it. The deafening sound that had woken me up every night at two a.m. for the last two months, blaring louder than I had ever heard it before. It was then I figured out where my car had stopped, why it had stopped. The front tires must have made it over the tracks but the car had lost enough momentum to make it over with the rear tires. I knew right where I was. My hazy mind had become no clearer, but I struggled my hardest trying to get my seatbelt undone. I screamed in frustration as I pulled at it with all of my strength but it didn’t budge. The blinding light raced closer and my mind’s haze turned to pure panic. The blinding light soon became all I could see and it wasn’t long before the deafening blare of the train’s horn and the clashing of scrunching metal turned to silence and a high pitched ringing noise, then everything turned dark.

All I could feel was pain, but one seemed to stand out above the rest. A searing pain in my back burned like flames were licking at my flesh. The high pitched ringing noise slowly dissipated and I could hear a quiet sawing noise, like a knife cutting away at something. When it stopped a pressure was lifted off of my chest and I could feel myself being pulled out of the car. A measly groan escaped my lips as all of the pain radiated and intensified from being disturbed.

“Shhh, Emily it’s okay, everything’s going to be alright, I’m here now.” A man’s voice called to me sweetly. My body had stopped moving and I could feel the ground cold beneath me, countered by the warmth of his arms that wrapped around me. “Everything is going to be okay.” The voice repeated.

I opened my eyes, blinking heavily a few times to disperse the cloudiness. Another groan escaped me as I tilted my head up to see the man behind the voice and suddenly everything made sense. His name evaded me, but I recognized his face he sat directly behind me in English 240, and I knew he was X. Every cell in my body ached to move away but none of them responded to my internal plea.

His hand brushed across my forehead, moving stray hairs out of my face. He smiled sweetly at me, and I wanted nothing more than to get away. “Emily, you were struck with some stray metal. I’m going to take it out now, ok?”

Every fiber of my being screamed no, don’t you touch me you freak! Though my body betrayed me, it’s only protest a measly strained whimper. His hand moved to my abdomen and a twinge pulsed through my stomach and through to my back as I felt him grab ahold of the piece of metal. “Alright on the count of three.. One.. Two..” Without reaching three he yanked the metal out of me and everything went numb. All of the pain subsided and was replaced with a cold sense of nothing. A few tears escaped my eyes and I looked up to see his smiling face. “Everything will be alright now Emily, I promise.”

Off in the distance I could hear sirens blaring, but I knew they would be too late. Everything was fading at once, a blackness begun to overcome my vision. Just as everything started to subside I felt his breath against my neck and his words rang through my ears like shattered glass. “Love always... X” I felt his cold lips against my cheek and everything; the worry, the fear, the pain, was engulfed into eternal darkness. ♦

DENOUEMENT

GARRETT HADWIN **SHORT STORY**

There was a lot of pain, at first, and then I lost myself. I did not know who, what, or where I was. I spent either forever, or a picosecond in this condition. I was not aware enough to try to get myself back together.

Then, suddenly, I awoke. I had a body. It seemed small, and weak, but it was mine. I was me. I realized that I was here, wherever here may be. I was surrounded by darkness and mystery. It took me a long time to get enough control of my body to explore, but it seemed that there was only more darkness.

Then, I found you.

You were also lost in the darkness, and you were familiar. When we found each other, we stayed together, and our dark world felt a little better.

You asked me where we were, once. I told you that I did not know, and you fell silent. We kept that silence for far too long, I told you that I did not think it mattered where we were. I was happy to be there with you.

You took my hand, and we stared into the darkness. I felt as though any darkness was trivial, as long as you were there holding my hand.

As we got better control of our bodies, we competed. Sometimes we saw who could run faster, who could jump higher, but before long we realized our bodies were nearly limitless. We could neither win, nor lose.

I remember never being particularly bothered by the darkness after we found each other. It was there, sure, but it was no longer important. There was finally someone to share it with, and that was all I had needed.

Eons had passed since you had asked where we were, when you finally commented on our surroundings again.

“Maybe this is the end.”

I pondered this for some time before I answered.

“Maybe this is the beginning.”

Then, the darkness was gone. Our world opened up

and there was life. Suddenly, there was ground beneath our feet, and plants flourished around us. You asked me how, and I could not answer. But then you closed your eyes, and animals sniffed at our feet. Our world was lush, and soft, and beautiful.

We watched over it for some years, tending to it, keeping it safe. It was the happiest time we had. Sure, there were maddening moments, and sad moments, but that world was ours. It was a labor of love that we shared.

One day, in our world, we leaned against a towering tree, and a creature came over to us. You picked it up and showed it all of your affection. The creature bloomed, suddenly filled with knowledge and power it could not comprehend. But it passed on this gift, and its children grew to understand it, and control it.

Soon, these creatures divided. They became factions. At times they were violent, but they were beautiful, and we loved them just the same.

But, soon, they became so intelligent and powerful, that they no longer needed us. They rebelled against us, and many denounced us. We were sad, and in my fury, I fear I poisoned them against us.

So we left.

For the first time in a long time, we felt loneliness, even in our company.

Some cried for help, and I raged, but in all your wisdom, you returned, and I soon followed.

They did not need us, and for all our help, they thrived mostly without us. We came to accept our roles, and we became proud. We were happy to create a world of such

joy, such power, and that world had become self-sufficient.

But our creation grew lonely, too. They longed for more, and I smiled at you. You smiled back, and we created another world. Before we knew it, we had thousands upon thousands of worlds, and we were happy.

Eventually, we grew tired. We had given so much, we no longer had any for ourselves. But we took nothing back. You squeezed my hand, and we wandered back into the darkness, content with the light we had made.

For a long time, all I knew was your hand in mine, and the darkness.

And that was enough. ♦

CONQUERING CUTTING: A STORY OF OVERCOMING SELF HARM

KATHY NICKERSON AWARD - LILLIAN PETIT ESSAY

I am a city. The streets of my mind are winding and intersecting. There are grimy, dreary alley corners and sunny, cheery parks. There are dreams as tall as skyscrapers and fears and insecurities as deeply imbedded as the sewer system.

Miles of my streets are lined with critical thoughts. No one ever told me all the negative things I thought about myself - that I was stupid, unlovable, awkward, a waste, a bad friend, a bad person, the list goes on for a mile. These thoughts were something I dealt with since the age of 8.

Even before I was 8 my biggest dream was to have a best friend. As an old soul I was serious about supporting friends. Unfortunately, I chose to invest myself in peers that abused my loyalty. Trust issues ensued. I refused to reveal the smallest personal detail to girls that I even

referred to as my “best friends.” There was just too much risk of getting hurt. Finally after months and months of thought processing if I could deem anyone worthy with my secrets, I did. And then they left. Well, not immediately after, but soon enough to make it painful.

Every time I was betrayed or left behind I crashed hard into a pit of emotions. I didn’t understand why my brothers could have wonderful lifelong friendships and I could constantly be left behind. That’s usually how I felt, like people left me, and it became a deeply imbedded fear that every person I met would follow the pattern.

Whether my friends migrated because of different schools, new boyfriends, or just plain mean-heartedness it left me with the feeling that I did something wrong. At 13 I came to the conclusion that if no one wanted to try to stay friends with me it obviously meant that I was

a dysfunctional human being who didn’t deserve friends, happiness, or even a life.

“There they go again,” I thought as I lay on my bed considering my most recent friend losses. *“It figures. No one ever really wants to be friends with me anyway. What’s wrong with me? I’m boring. That’s it. Not fun. A loser. I’m no original. What idiot can’t hold on to a couple of friends for more than a few years? Not my brothers that’s for sure. Lucky bastards.”* The thoughts welled inside until they sprung out my eyes in the form of tears. *“What the hell do you think you’re crying about? You are so lame. Get over it. It doesn’t matter. What do you care? You DON’T care. Care about nothing. Then nothing can hurt you ever again. People suck anyway. All you need is yourself.....and that razor over there.”*

Everything is tense. My jaw is clenched, my fists are two balls with my nails digging into my palms. My eyes are squeezed tight so I can’t see my horrible self. In one quick motion I stride to the drawer below the sink and grab a new razor. My vision is red with hate for myself, hate for my emotions, hate for my very soul and whatever else is inside of me. All I knew was whatever was in needed to be out.

And then I was actually seeing red. Three slices oozing blood on my hip. My triple bladed razor gave a close shave, and a stinging cut. *“There it goes.”* I thought. *“Everything disgusting inside of me leaking out.”* So I did it again. And again. Finally, I felt a little better, or really I felt nothing. Numb. Finally. The only pain I felt was my throbbing hip. A physical hurt. No longer mentally hurting. I liked it, and I would continue to do it. Even past the point when I realized I couldn’t stop it.

A few days later the numbness started to wear off, and cuts were scabbed over. In the shower, I stroked the thin lined scabs on my hip. My reminder that I was numb. My badge of shame ingrained in my skin.

I step into the vicious cycle that is my thoughts. The vicious cycle that is self-harm. *“You like to physically hurt yourself. Well now you really can never have friends. No one would love you if they knew. You are a freak, and everyone would know if they find out what you’ve done. Who lets their own thoughts bully them? You have no right to self-harm. Other people have much worse lives than you and all you do is sit around and boo hoo about your lack of intimacy. They would think you just want attention. They wouldn’t understand. They wouldn’t understand how you are a terrible person. How you don’t even know how to act human, or be happy, or stop obsessing.”* I agreed. I agreed wholeheartedly.

So I did it again. In my eyes, to cut once made me a self-harmer and it was a title that cannot be removed, so why not do it again. I already screwed up my chances of being loved anyway.

The new, fresh cuts crisscrossed over the scabbed lines of the older ones. The hot water from the shower head added an extra sting to my shredded skin as I watched my blood dilute from the water and wash down my leg. Numb again. “Who needs friends? All they do is let me down.”

When I would cut I was angry at myself... and others. But I wouldn’t make “others” aware. I let myself suffer because it was my fault. *“Take some responsibility, don’t be so blameful of others.”* Relax. Cut. Hurt, slash, rip at my skin. Until the anger, the depression, the sadness,

bled out and all that's left is numbness. Float through the world. Don't see it, don't see the people, don't care. This was my mantra.

My biggest goal became to not care. A cycle of sadness, then anger, then numbness; that's how cutting worked for me.

I liked the look of the cuts. See the history, the proof on my skin of my power, my ability. Me, taking control of something in my life. Right after I cut it would go like this, but later it was a brand. A slowly disappearing reminder of my worthlessness. Sometimes I would stroke the scabbing skin reminding myself how much I didn't matter, why I did it, why I was driven to it,, and why I couldn't function without it. Why no one must know - they would judge me, wouldn't understand, try to get me to stop, and I couldn't fathom stopping. Not when it was the only way I knew how to live.

I knew it was bad though. I felt I was wronging God, but He wasn't helping me so I did it out of spite and anger and anguish. In fact, I blamed Him. His fault. He drove me to it. Yet I still called out his name in my sadness, but the calls turned to accusations in my anger, and then there would be the slice of skin and there I was - numb. The girl that felt nothing. The girl that would let nothing get to her. The girl that would be fixed by breaking - whole by being ripped apart.

Somehow I stopped. Somehow I convinced myself to stop the slicing. I remember sermons at youth group directed at self-harmers. I knew God was reaching, but I had to reach back. Pure willpower to no longer cut. Things started look up after that.

When I would fall back into cutting, it would happen slowly. I would stop trying to control the pressure building inside of me. I would start to surrender myself to the feelings again, worn out from trying to be strong. Breathing would become difficult. Walking, talking, and eating would become no less difficult. Then, the cracks in my fortress that had been slowly spreading and increasing in size would bust my defenses and I couldn't resist the sting of the cuts anymore. Cutting brought me the paradox of feeling and not feeling.

Cutting brought the awareness of my fake happiness and the thought that maybe everybody else was faking it too.

"Hi, How are you?"

"Good," I would respond while silently screaming "*I'M THE FARTHEST THING FROM FINE. I'm bloodied and broken! I'm torn and hurt! And I absolutely, 100% hate myself..... and I bet you're not doing any better.*"

Anthony, my older brother of 17 months, was the first family member to find out about my cutting. We were at Bay Shore camp. My home away from home in the summer since I was 7 years old.

At about the middle of the week they split the boys and girls up to talk about hard hitting issues. This is where I felt the something inside of me shift. All of a sudden I felt this weight on my chest, unlike my self-harm pressure that wanted to burst out of my skin, this pressure wanted to come out of my mouth. I had to tell someone about my cutting. I hadn't told a soul up until this point and I was scared to death.

I shook and cried as I pulled one my counselors and the Dean of Women over to a corner to explain my battle with self-harm. Most of that conversation is a blur of tears, but I remember the first three things my counselor said to me, "It doesn't shock me," "I still love you," and "You have to tell your parents." The first two were very nice, calming things to hear after I had just given away my biggest most shameful secret. The last one though, filled me with dread. "*I can't do it.*" I thought. And I immediately shut down into justification mode.

By this point in summer 2011 I hadn't cut for a couple months. I thought "I'm fine now. I have it under control. No need to let my parents in on it." They thought a good first baby step would be telling Anthony though. Since he was already at the camp and everything. I was still very scared and nervous, but he was my brother NOT my parents. We were close. Always have been. Always will be.

I remember telling him. Sitting in our gazebo. The one we and our friends had claimed for ourselves. My counselor was there for support. There to make sure I didn't chicken out. He cried. I felt bad knowing that my pain had brought him pain. Ashamed. He hugged me. Now I felt relief.

I didn't tell me parents when they picked us up though. Didn't want to be stuck in the car for an hour and a half with no way to answer their questions. I didn't tell them in the next week. I didn't tell them when I had a perfect opportunity to share my breakthroughs from the week. I didn't tell them a month later. It was another year before I mustered up the courage.

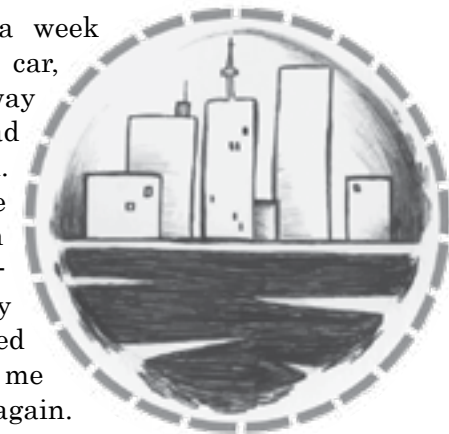
Paul Campau really entered my life on January 1, 2012. Even though we had been in close quarters a week prior for a youth trip in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I probably had maybe two brief conversations with him.

The ride home from that trip changed everything.

We talked. We talked for 12 hours. I never once considered in those 12 hours that this boy in the seat in front of me would ever be anything other than the boy I passed the time flirting with on the way home from a youth trip. I would not have believed at the time that this man would effect my life the way that he has. He is so gosh darn stubborn, and he pushes me. But it's good because without him I don't think I ever would have got the courage to go to therapy. And without therapy I wouldn't be healing. I truly believe God brought him into my life. Even though everything he did wasn't good. Because, well, he shares a part in my relapse.

He got in contact with me the day after we arrived home. Swiped my email from a girl who was one of my roommates during the previous week.

One night, about a week into dating, sitting in his car, parked in his friend's driveway we killed his battery. I had talked till his car died. Explaining to him why he was wasting his time on unlovable, previous self-harmer, depressive, anxiety ridden- me. All Paul wanted to do was help. He made me promise to never cut again.



Unfortunately, I broke that promise.

After two weeks of dating he asked me to be his official girlfriend. I accepted, and sealed it with a kiss. My FIRST kiss. A first kiss was a big deal in my family. We had a book about how it was so precious. I believed that book. I purposely held out that kiss until I felt sure that I wanted to give that precious gift away.

When my mom found out a few weeks later she was disappointed. Disappointed that we were already at that physical level. This upset me. I don't specifically remember what was said, but I do remember that my brain translated it as "I thought you were smarter than that? How could you be so stupid!? We had a BOOK for Pete's sake!"

I became sad. Sad that I had given it up. Sad that I let my parents down. But that stage of emotion didn't last long. I became infuriated. SHE wasn't the one in the relationship. SHE didn't understand how strongly I felt about this guy, and how much that scared me. That I would have never taken a chance on him if I was strongly attracted and strongly believed we were meant to be. SHE didn't know much he had already done for me. Making me feel like I wasn't unlovable and making me promise to never cut again. I broke that promise.

I was mad, upset, angry that I had been chastised for something other people had done in kindergarten, on first dates, or with STRANGERS. I took out my anger... on myself.

I cut and instead of the numb that I expected, I felt awful. Not satisfied with the results I cut again and again until I was numb and red and raw.

That was February 8, 2012. Not even a month into mine and Paul's relationship. Three days later I told my parents about my bad habit.

Three days changed me.

In that time I told Paul what I had done. He wasn't mad.... At first. He did get mad eventually because I broke a promise, but through all that he was still trying to help me. While I was just trying to block him out.

Something inside of me, from the very first moment we shared in that van ride home made me want to be completely open with him. Which terrified me given my "never open up" policy. However, I felt like he saw right through me. I didn't want to lie to him. Somehow he always gets me to come around to him.

He also gives second chances. But this second chance had a clause – "cut again and I'll leave for good," he said. It's been almost 3 years since then and not one drop of self harm. Hasn't been easy though.

February 11, 2012. I shove my back up against the wall of my parents' bedroom to steady myself and to keep myself from running away. I look at my parents seated on their bed then quickly look down at the floor. I tell the story of my battle with self harm sans eye contact. I can't bear to see the reaction on their faces.

They take it almost just as I hoped they would. Concern, but no real action against the problem. Because I do my best to convince them it isn't a problem... anymore. Swept under the rug, with the occasional check in, I continue to lie myself to happiness.

I tossed around the idea of a therapist for months, but could never bring myself to actually address the topic with my parents. A therapist felt so lowly to me. I felt like I was above a therapist or at least that I should be above a therapist. But I needed someone trained to help me really sort out my issues. Just because I wasn't hurting myself anymore didn't mean the urges weren't still there. Just because people new about my painful past didn't make it disappear from my present.

I look at the clock- 1:45 am. I locate my phone through the blur of bad vision with my glasses and the tears that make it even harder to see. I dial Paul's number and wait for him to pick up as my body shakes from whatever emotion is inside of me- fear? Hate? Desperation? After a few rings I hear his groggy voice through the speaker mumbling a greeting. I can barely get the words, "just talk to me about anything" out before erupting into snuffles, choking on my sobs. So he does. He talks. He talks about anything that comes to mind trying to get me to laugh. An hour goes by and the sobs have subsided into nothing but a sore throat, puffy eyelids, and a drowsy voice. Finally we can hang up the phone, and both of us can sleep.

A year after I told my parents, Paul pushed me again- into the arms of a therapist. Late one night during a typical tearful phone call, he gave me another ultimatum, "tell your parents you want to see a therapist or I'll tell them that you need to." I didn't want him to scare my parents so I talked to them. My mom did some research and we chose a Christian counselling center.

Therapy brought new questions. Not sure who I am anymore. What kind of a person would harm themselves on purpose? "*Not a stable one,*" I thought. I thought maybe

I was just bipolar. My therapist later diagnosed me with depression and an anxiety disorder, but not bipolar. That was all in my head, as were all my other problems.

Change is a journey. It is slow and takes its sweet time, but it is fast and alters in seconds. An unfair paradox. What once was smooth, healthy skin can be ripped and bloodied before a breath can calm the mind. The actions took seconds, the thoughts took years. My poisoned mind was inevitably slower to fix. By the time I went to therapy, the faintest of scars tainted my hip bone. My mind was still bleeding. It could not, without pointed hard work, scab over and create new skin. New, healthy thoughts.

My cutting journey began in 2010, but my poisonous thoughts have been around for much longer. Unbeknownst to me they infected my thought for years.

November 16, 2014. My therapist tell me she sees no point for me to see her anymore. My mind can combat the poisonous thoughts. Cutting no longer arises as an option when I feel hurt, anxious, or depressed.

The streets of my mind are clean from the litter of harmful thinking. There are still dark alleyways and warm parks, but everything is under close surveillance. A task force patrols for the occasional litter. The wondering thought of, "*Everyone hates me, and they should because I am not worth a breath of life.*" Every evil thought is capture, and made new. ♦

THE THUNDER WITHIN

FIRST PLACE — JEFF KROLL — ESSAY

The humid air of summer clung low to the ground, it wasn't quite noon yet but the heat of the day was already repressive; nothing stirred, even the animals sat still in the shadows. Still the small gravel path crunched as a line of men marched quietly down it as it turned through the low hills, the tall trees in stark contrast to this clear and blasted place through which they trudged, a moonscape of craters and thin sun scorched grass in a sea of green. Soon they reached their destination, a small pit surrounded by a low earthen berm on three sides making a small gray valley amongst the green. A collection of weather worn wooden pallets and dented and abused barrels were its only inhabitants save for the line of figures fastened securely to the wooden posts opposite the men, as they entered and spread out in a line before them positioning themselves in a long staggered line by the barrels. Soon, a command was given and the line of men all produce pistols and level them at the motionless figures just over twenty feet away. No one moves or makes a sound except for the cicadas, their

drone providing the sole soundtrack to the tense scene. Suddenly the sound of thunder ripples out across the valley, the sound echoing off the earth walls; the still air is interrupted as somewhere in the distance a flock of crows takes to startled flight, cawing their alarm to all who'll listen while in the valley the brass shell casings also take flight, arcing lazily through the air. Before they can tink off of the weed choked gravel below the thunder roars again, the line of pistols belching fire and spewing forth copper clad lead which in an instant hit their targets with a wet thud, or a crack when one of the bullets passes through and connects with the wooden post behind. The scene repeats as the white flames and thunder mark another salvo; the men fire again and again until one after another their slides lock back as they expend the last of their ammunition before they slam home a new magazine and repeat the process.

Most classes don't end in a hail of bullets, most people do not measure their success by their group size, and most instructors do not grade with a ruler, but that is

exactly how mine end and that is my measure of success, but then I'm not like most people; I'm an NRA instructor. It is my job to train people how to shoot; that scene on the firing range plays out over and over again, but most of my work, the important part anyway, takes place in the classroom. While I am very good at what I do at the range, my job is not only to teach one how to shoot but also when to shoot, and, hopefully, how to avoid having to shoot in the first place. My goal is to save lives, and while I will likely never know if I am successful in that job or not that is my true measure of success.

Some people may see that last statement as a contradiction, after all, how can I save lives by teaching people to kill? But it's not a contradiction and that is not what I do. I teach self-defense; that is, how to protect one's self if one comes under violent criminal attack. The gun is merely a tool, one of many. One does not always use the gun for every circumstance just as one does not use a screw driver to pound a nail or a hammer to drive a screw, the right tool must be employed, and part of my job is teaching which that is.

The gun is no different than the hammer or the screw driver it is a tool, an inanimate object possessed of no will or motive of its own, left to its own devices it would just as soon sit on the table until the sun burns out as it is to fire a shot in anger, it is not good, it is not evil, it is not right, nor is it wrong, it is simply a tool like any other; it is all in how you use it. The gun, as I teach it, is a tool of last resort, to be used only when necessary to protect life, either the students or that of an innocent third party. It is used as a tool to prevent grievous bodily injury, rape, and death of the innocent. When it is employed it is to be used to stop the attack not as a means to execute the guilty, firing must legally,

and ethically, stop once the threat has been eliminated, either by retreat, surrender, or incapacitation. In the vast majority of cases the mere presentation of the gun is enough to resolve the issue with no shots being fired at all, some two million such defensive uses occur every year that is, at least potentially two million lives saved by the simple presence of the gun. Knowing when to shoot, or when to stop shooting is just as important as how, one shoots to stop not (necessarily) to kill. Which is not to say that the attacker getting killed, or seriously wounded is not a possibility, it certainly is, and it is true that the most effective way to stop an attack, if indeed it comes to shooting, is also the most effective way to kill the attacker, killing is never the goal though, stopping is. If they live or not is immaterial; stopping them is the goal.

Let us not lose sight of the fact that the criminal, not the defender, is the one who initiated this, and lethal force is only being used as a last resort to defend life. The gun is a lifesaving tool. There are those who would suggest that a women, lying raped, beaten, and strangled to death with her own panties is somehow "morally superior" to a women holding a smoking gun standing over a dead rapist, I wholeheartedly disagree. The gun may have been used to take the life of the rapist, but it saved the life of the victim, and all the future victims as well, it saved lives; just as it would have if the rapist, seeing an armed victim, would have simply ran away. Some might raise the argument "what if the bad guy just took the gun away and used it against her?" To wit, I would reply that statistics simply do not bear that out, according to the data, men who resist with a gun are 1.5 times less likely to be injured than those who don't, and women are 2.5 times less likely; also remember

that in any scenario where one is justified in using the gun it is in defense of life, meaning that there already exists a high probability of serious bodily harm, sexual assault, or death so the gun on balance can really only tip the odds in the defenders favor, likely even more so than the overall numbers I already mentioned. That is of course assuming that the defender is actually willing and prepared to use it; one of the very first things I ask my students is “are you prepared to shoot someone to save your life?” If the answer is yes than the gun can only help.

Remember in the example I gave above she was dead if she didn’t use the gun so she had nothing to lose, while real life is seldom so clear as the written word that is very much the situation in a real defensive situation, your life, or the life of another innocent is at immediate risk if you do nothing so oughtn’t you be prepared to defend it? Those who like to use the “disarmament” argument like to argue from an absolute, that since a successful defense is not 100% guaranteed every single time, that because things like disarmament are possible, however remotely, that that somehow, all logic and statistics to the contrary be damned, equates to a zero percent chance and that the defense would be successful at all while completely ignoring all possibility of success. That reasoning makes as much sense as saying “since all dogs are animals all animals are dogs.” It makes the basic logical fallacy that it leaps to the completely unsupported conclusion that since some may fail, all will, even when data and common sense directly contradict, it just makes no sense whatsoever. While it’s true that I may one day loose a gunfight, it will not be for the lack of shooting back.

The gun, as I mentioned, is not the only thing that I teach; I also teach how to avoid a fight to begin with, how to make oneself a less appealing target to criminals, and how if a fight does occur how to deescalate it, or barring that, other methods of defense besides just the gun. As the saying goes “if your only tool is a hammer, then all the world looks like nails,” and as I said the gun is but one tool among many which is to be used only when absolutely necessary. Part of my job is ensuring that my students possess all the tools of self-defense, physical, and mental, not just the gun. Some things are simple like just keeping one’s head up, paying attention, and making brief eye contact as one walks down the street in order to both be aware of ones surroundings and any potential dangers, but also to show potential criminals that one is alert and paying attention and is probably not the easy unaware target looking at their feet that they are looking for, or not automatically flinging open the door every time someone knocks, but instead using some caution and first using the windows, and peephole to check who it is first and only opening the door if it is someone whom one wants to actually talk to. Other things are simple things that people just don’t often think of like not leaving boxes for expensive products sitting on the curb for trash pickup while all the while advertising the contents of the house to potential home invaders, better would be to place them in a non-see-through garbage bag first, or things like keeping bushes trimmed so as not to provide hiding places for an ambush and to give the impression that the house is in fact occupied. Common sense things like avoiding unfamiliar or potentially hazardous areas, and personal security principles like not posting ones schedule to Facebook, and practical concepts like what to carry, how to carry it, and why. Physical defense, like shooting, is only a part of what I teach, true personal defense is a much more complex topic.

One may ask that since having to use the gun is such an unlikely scenario “why would you feel the need to carry one at all? Aren’t you just looking for trouble?” But to that I would ask them if they have a spare tire in their car, or a fire extinguisher in their kitchen, are they looking for a flat tire? Do they secretly pine for a house fire? The question is absurd; while the chances of having to use it are indeed remote so is the chance of a flat tire or kitchen fire and yet no one, that I know of anyway, would bat an eye at the suggestion of carrying a spare tire in the trunk, or keeping a fire extinguisher under the sink, why then is a pistol on the hip such a foreign concept? Much like a spare tire or fire extinguisher one probably will not need it, but it’s better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it.

I think perhaps that the very concept of self-defense scares them, the thought that there are actually people in the world who would deliberately seek to hurt them, and that they should take precautions against that scares them so much that they try to shield themselves from it by instead assigning that fear to an inanimate object, the gun, and blindly lashing out at those who do decide to defend themselves because it makes them confront the frightening and uncomfortable concept of their own vulnerability. If everyone were just as helpless as themselves, they seem to reason, then they would be safe. That however is just not the case. I am fortunate in that I have never had to draw, or fire my weapon in anger, a trend that I hope continues, but I am prepared to do so if it ever becomes necessary, and that is what I teach my students. I can however think of several occasions when I came close to the point where that would have been necessary.

In the first, while exiting a show at Cobo Hall in Detroit and walking back toward the car a very aggressive pan handler emerged from behind a parked car armed with an old tape wrapped wooden hockey stick which he held aggressively in front of him, and claimed to be trying to “sell” as he begged for money, my hand was on my weapon, but he backed down after a firm “no,” the threat being implied as opposed to actual.

In the second a very similar situation occurred with a “pan handler” emerging in a darkened parking lot and asking for money. Despite repeatedly saying no, he continued trying to casually close distance with me as he continued to talk to me about “needing baby formula” all the while visibly suffering from drug withdrawal, judging by his appearance and mannerisms I would say Methamphetamine. He backed down however as he noticed my stance change as I prepared to reach for my weapon.

The third incident involved a very large heavily built belligerent man who was angry that he had to stop to avoid taking off my car door as I was exiting my car to go in to the hardware store, never mind the fat that he was the one not paying attention to parked cars and going in to a parking spot at 20Mph. He screamed, swore, and aggressively postured to the point that I drew a mental line in the sand, but that was the end of it, he soon withdrew in to the store ending the confrontation.

The fourth incident was another large man, this one though had just grabbed a women, who as I later found out he had been stalking, and slammed her in to a shelf before chasing her through the grocery store and tried to follow her in to the woman’s bathroom where she was trying to hide, tossing a female employee across the

hall in the process. I and a group of other employees tried to stop him at several points during the incident with him violently pushing through, until finally I stopped him at the bathroom door and pinned him to the wall, it never got to the point where I considered using a weapon, but the thought was there. Eventually he left the store but only to stand just outside the doors lying in ambush for his prey to return, it was there that he was eventually found by the sheriff's department and arrested.

The fifth incident was the closest I have come, in that one a car of about four to five young black males was pursuing me, and attempting to run me off the road after I failed to make an illegal turn against traffic to let them pass despite their laying on the horn in demand. Ultimately they began weaving across the road throwing beer cans, and bottles at my car, some empty, some full. In addition to being violent and belligerent, a beer can thrown at a car windshield at 50Mph is a deadly threat, it has more than enough mass and velocity to penetrate. Any one of them had the potential of being lethal if it crashed through the glass and hit me in the head, or causing a serious wreck even if it didn't hit me directly but merely showered me in shards of glass. Fortunately their drunken aim was off and none of their ad hoc projectiles actually hit my car but I was actively reaching for my pistol, and had I gotten to it my intention was to open fire, or at least prepare to in the hope that, seeing the pistol, they would modify their behavior, lest their aim improve. Fortunately though, before my hand could connect they tore off in a squeal of tires, drunkenly weaving around the road as they did.

All but one of those incidents ended peacefully, and none of them required the use of my gun, but any one of them could have easily gone the other way, which is why

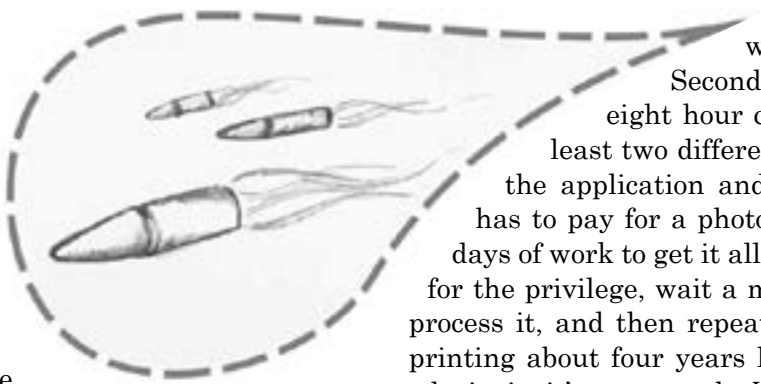
it is important to always carry whenever one can. Even if one thinks having to actually use the gun is unlikely, one simply never knows if one will need it or not. If one doesn't carry a spare tire and gets a flat in most cases the worst that will happen to them is that they are stuck on the side of the road for a couple of hours, if one doesn't have a fire extinguisher, they may lose their house, or if they're lucky just their kitchen, but insurance will cover that. If they don't have a gun when they need one though the cost may be their life. I give people the tools they need to survive, to defend their own lives, and others, not to mention the indirect benefit caused by the untold number of future victims who will now avoid being victimized in the first place. That is why I say that my goal is to save lives.

I meet all kinds doing what I do, men and women, young and old, novice, and experienced alike, and from all professions and backgrounds. I can't say that there are any hard and fast rules for how well people shoot, but I have noticed some interesting things; women tend to shoot better than men, some amateurs can sometime perform better than experienced shooters, and some "experienced" shooters are shockingly bad, some of the worst, perhaps ironically, are those with law enforcement experience, like I said there are no hard and fast rules and I have learned to expect the unexpected in my classes.

One example that springs to mind was a young women, maybe twenty two or so years old, who took the class, ostensibly with her boyfriend though he was not to close, she was alone most of the time. What surprised me though was despite the fact that she claimed to have never shot before, or indeed to have even held a gun, her very small size, and that she had a muscle disease that made a proper firing stance painful and severely weakened her

grip she was probably the best natural shot to have ever come through my class. Her first group was about the size of a fist, which for most students is the best I can hope for in the short time I normally have with them on the range, but by the end of the short one hundred round course of fire her shots were touching each other. I actually took her aside and seriously recommended to her that she consider competitive shooting, because she had the knack for it. A complete novice with a very slight build, and a debilitating disability managed to out shoot experienced shooters twice her age and double her size, it just shows that you can't underestimate anyone.

I've had the opposite experience too of course, people that should have been good shots barely qualifying. My qualifying scoring is simple: keep all your shots in a nine inch circle at twenty one feet. It sounds easy, and it is, I teach what the late Lieutenant Colonel Cooper called "combat accuracy," that is to say being able to reliably hit center of mass on the bad guy. I can, and have, taught how to get really small groups and get really high scores in competitions, but for the brief time of the concealed pistol course I focus on the basics. Even with those relaxed standards though, some people just need extra attention, and I am pleased to say that I never have had to fail anyone.



I do not issue licenses, that is up to the state, I merely provide the required training. Upon completion I issue a nice certificate; the student, assuming they want their license, must then take the certificate along with their completed application, a passport sized photograph, a receipt from their fingerprinting, and \$105 to the county clerk's office. About a month later, depending on the county, they will receive their concealed pistol license. I can think of no other constitutionally guaranteed right that requires so much red tape, money, and paperwork to exercise. I imagine if the government were to demand a similar process to exercise free speech the public would not stand for it, so how is it we allow them to trample the Second Amendment? One needs an eight hour class, paperwork, a visit to at least two different government offices, one for the application and another for finger printing, has to pay for a photo, has to take off at least two days of work to get it all done, and then shell out \$105 for the privilege, wait a month or more for the state to process it, and then repeat all but the class and finger printing about four years later, yet there are still some who insist it's not enough. Would we tolerate this for even a second were we talking about free speech? I love what I do, but the fact that my class is required is sickening; it's a good class, and valuable information and training, but it should be a choice not a requirement. ♦

TESTING THE SPIRIT: THE INSIDIOUS EVIL OF THE GHOST IN HAMLET

SECOND PLACE — THERESE MAJESKI — ESSAY

Acknowledged as perhaps one of Shakespeare’s greatest plays, *Hamlet* retains a mysterious and undying appeal. A duplicitous king and a tortured prince contribute to the play’s sometimes ambiguous, often agonizing welter of confusion and evil. Yet, among the myriad sources of consternation, one figure stands out as the primary root of Hamlet’s, and indeed Denmark’s, ensuing ills. Initiating Hamlet’s destructive search for revenge, the ghost of the Prince’s father carries a sinister aspect. Despite a certain sense of ambiguity in its portrayal, the ghost is unequivocally malevolent in the way it goads the Prince to a vengeance that destroys him and all those he knows. The effects of the ghost are entirely negative, suggesting it is evil, perhaps demonic, in nature.

Debuting in the first scene of *Hamlet*, the ghost from the start dominates the course of events and inspires a jumble of reactions in the mind of the protagonist

ranging from fear to recognition. Appearing for the first time in Act I, Scene I, to Marcellus and Bernardo, two men at arms, and Horatio, a friend of Hamlet, the ghost haunts the battlements of the Castle of Denmark. Various elements of Scene I hint at the possibility that the ghost may not be benign. One support, argues author Eleanor Prosser, of the ghost’s dubious moral standing is revealed when Horatio requests in Heaven’s name that it speak; rather than reply to an appeal invoking the power of God, it departs as if repulsed, implying an estrangement from goodness (qtd. in Gottschalk 57). Additionally, the ghost must flee at cock-crow and may not linger into the hours of light, similarly hinting, according to Prosser, that the spirit is a creature of darkness (qtd. in Gottschalk 57).

Further clues link the ghost to potential malignance; when the ghost demands Hamlet enact an allegedly just revenge for its murder, the way it behaves casts doubt on the wholesomeness of the mission. Prosser asserts

that by speaking convincingly of the evil of Claudius and the betrayal of Gertrude, the spirit thus manipulates Hamlet’s reactions to reach its vengeful goal; surely a benign spirit would not need to resort to “skirting specific detail” or evoking negative ideas so violently in order to convince the Prince (qtd. in Gottschalk 57). Similarly, the ghost, although claiming to issue from Purgatory, speaks of meeting death deprived of the benefit of repentance and bearing significant sins on his soul; perhaps Hamlet’s later desire to kill Claudius in such a way that the usurping King reaches damnation stems from a suspicion that his own father is in Hell (1.5. 1-98, Tiffany, par.17). If the spirit is not a demon, it may be Hamlet’s father who has been dammed.

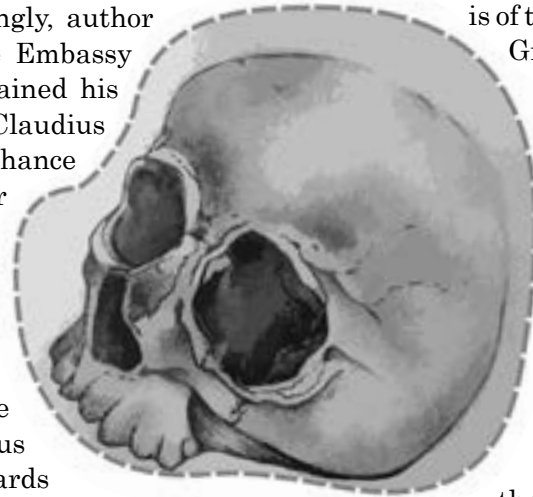
Indeed, in almost every appearance, the ghost, although portrayed with an ambivalence that makes discerning its nature difficult, nevertheless manages to carry an aura of menace and remains questionable in its motives. One particular instance in which the evidences surrounding the ghost strongly imply evil may be found in Act 3 Scene 4. As Hamlet confronts his mother, expressing his outrage at her hurried marriage to Claudius, the ghost appears but is only visible and audible to Hamlet and the audience (3.4.118-56). Shakespeare scholar Lily B. Campbell explains that King James, author of a work on demons and the occult, and chronological peer of the Bard, suggests an interesting theory: the King claims that the devil, in order to ensnare souls, will manipulate human perception so that only the object of his deception may see him manifest (87, 127). Campbell goes on to imply that the devil may have been performing a similar feat when Hamlet can see and hear the ghost in the bedchamber, yet his mother cannot (27). King James’ theory may be indicative of the thinking in Shakespeare’s time; if the

King thought the idea valid enough to publish, it may have been a significantly prominent cultural belief. Perhaps, then, Shakespeare had King James’ ideas regarding demonic manifestations in mind when he penned *Hamlet*, possibly indicating that he intended the ghost to be seen as evil.

A veritable emissary of disorder and strife, the spirit sows the seeds of revenge, suspicion, and perhaps madness in *Hamlet*, affecting the Prince in wholly harmful ways. Truly, little or no good comes of the ghost’s meddling; rather its urgings send Hamlet on an increasingly steep decent into confusion and corruption. Out of a misguided desire for justice and a torturous drive for revenge, Hamlet himself courts damnation with the ghost. Indeed, by the end of the play, Hamlet may very well be residing in Hell. Spurred on by the vengeful exhortations of the ghost, Hamlet continually plunges deeper into moral depravity, growing increasingly perturbed, directly or indirectly causing the deaths of seven cast members and eventually throwing himself completely into the hideously vengeful task that leads to his own demise. The ghost essentially leads Hamlet to self-destruction. Hamlet’s readiness to believe the veracity of the ghost seems staggering, yet Campbell expounds that, according to King James, the devil frequently plays on the inherent weaknesses of men, exploiting the flaws of their temperaments to corrupt them; Hamlet’s gloomy and brooding melancholic temperament would be particularly prone to the deceptions of the devil (87-88). Hence, the devil, or perhaps Hamlet’s father suffering in Hell, employs the Prince’s melancholic foibles to set in motion an ominous series of harmful events.

Acting to the detriment of the Danish court with Hamlet as his agent, the ghost also seeks to pervert the lives of those who surround the Prince. Ultimately because of the spirit’s pernicious interference, the Court falls into a welter of corruption and chaos that culminate in harm to all of Denmark. Admittedly, the initial evil afflicting the Court stems from Claudius’ shameful murder of his brother, but all harm thereafter traces back to the efforts of the ghost. Interestingly, author G. Wilson Knight in his essay “The Embassy of Death,” contends that while he gained his power through unethical means, Claudius is nevertheless a skilled ruler, perchance more suited for the execution of power than Hamlet, as the Prince possess faults of character that render him unfit to rule (Hoy 185-93). Claudius, then, while sinful, should by no means be deposed, as his fall would further destabilize Denmark. The ghost however, insists that Claudius die, and by goading Hamlet towards this end simultaneously sends Claudius to his probable damnation, and perchance reaps further souls for his Hell in the deaths of Ophelia, Gertrude, and Polonius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and even Laertes also die in states that leave their eternal destinations in doubt. Indeed, the ghost accomplishes a devilish work; the majority of the cast dies, speeding more likely to damnation than salvation, and Denmark itself falls to the usurping outside force of Fortinbras, the Norwegian Prince.

Likely the most condemning argument for the evil status of the ghost lies in its direct opposition



to Christian teaching. The spirit urges a recourse forbidden to Christians: revenge. In his essay “Of Ghost and Spirits Walking by Night” Lewes Lavater, who like King James was fairly contemporary to Shakespeare in chronology, explains that for Catholics, a crucial criterion for the discernment between good and evil spirits rests in whether or not the manifestation adheres to doctrine; if an apparition speaks contrary to Church teaching, it is of the devil (Hoy 111-15). Similarly, essayist Grace Tiffany notes that Hamlet contains a variance of references distinctly reminiscent of Catholicism, such as the use of the last rites (Tiffany, par. 4). If Catholicism holds such a significant, if subtle, presence in *Hamlet*, the logical conclusion is that the ghost should be judged by Catholic standards. Hence, the specter is not of God and must, by default, be demonic in origin.

Inciting further misery in the already troubled kingdom of Denmark, the ghost brings additional discord. All that the spirit touches through Hamlet withers, from the Princes’ love for his mother, to Ophelia’s sanity. In the face of such blatant destructions of life and morality, the conclusion that the spirit bears an evil intent and nature appears nearly inevitable and the specter’s malignant urgings to be avenged leave little doubt to its demonic status. Far more deadly that the poison used to dispatch Hamlet’s father, or the brew that sealed the fate of the Prince himself, the venom of the ghost is insidious and all encompassing. Something is indeed rotten in the state of Denmark and that rot manifests in the person of the ghost. ♦

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THE EPIDEMIC OF NARCISSISM

ANNELISE GARTRELL **ESSAY**

What is more important than self? Sadly, nothing is more important than self in America’s increasingly narcissistic society; there was a time when others were more important than self. As newer, better kinds of social media engrain themselves into today’s society, the thinking of others falls by the wayside, and self takes rises and rules over the masses. Narcissism, the love of one’s self in an extreme, yet grotesque, way, has truly become a disease that spreads across America, spills into the oceans, and travels to other countries. Narcissism must have a devoted following in order for it to survive. What better place for it to find its strongest support group than America’s self-centering, self-loving society? Social media is the best place to start a narcissistic journey, and the avenue of choice would seem to be Facebook. A simple to use social media outlet, Facebook allows narcissistic tendencies are becoming more evident in the lack of behavioral restraints and self-glorification that riddle social media such as Facebook.

The very apparent lack of behavioral restraints being enforced is clearly demonstrated through the things stated on Facebook, specifically through status updates and comments. They use their status updates and their personal comments as a means to promote their ideas, their opinions, and their beliefs. Narcissistic individuals can thoroughly promote their favorite person- self. “People who score highly on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory questionnaire had more friends on Facebook, tagged themselves more often and updated their newsfeeds more regularly,” says Pearse. Whether it is through words,

photos, videos, or even links to other webpages, they have the power and the “supposed right” to force their views upon others; in the case of these narcissists, they will undoubtedly use these varying mediums to gain attention for themselves rather than some important event or other person.

The personal and often inappropriate declarations made by narcissists simply do not belong out there in the open across every social medium they have access to, no matter how “important” they believe their private lives to be (Firestone). For example, when someone has a fight with either a family member, close friend, or significant other, these narcissists feel it is vital to share it with everyone on Facebook; it is as if they cannot keep their problems between themselves and those personally involved. No, the whole world must be informed of their little drama so that they can get all the attention and the “instant gratification” of shallow, moral support. Pearse says: “They often say shocking things and inappropriately self-disclose because they cannot stand to be ignored or waste a chance of self-promotion.” Social media is for sharing, but the amount of sharing has gotten way out of hand (Firestone).

Self-glorification in social media allows the narcissistic individual a chance to improve their false sense of “self-esteem.” The self-esteem being encouraged today is typically very shallow and is not true self-esteem; it is merely an emotional high that they can feed off and that they can hide behind. Firestone says, “Self-esteem differs from narcissism in that it represents an attitude built on accomplishments we’ve mastered, values we’ve adhered to,

and care we’ve shown toward others.” Self-esteem is not a selfish, self-centered trait; it deals more with how one deals with varying situations and other people in everyday life. Firestone continues to explain, “Narcissism, conversely, is often based on a fear of failure or weakness, a focus on one’s self, an unhealthy drive to be seen as the best, and a deep-seated insecurity and underlying feeling of inadequacy.” It focuses on the fears of a weak, selfish individual. This is why narcissists feel the need to glorify themselves through social media; they are afraid of their truest selves! They believe that the shallow self-esteem they have developed through social media will carry them when all it is really doing is giving them a temporary, emotional high that will eventually pass and will have to be reinstated through various self-glorifying practices.

Along with giving them a false sense of self-esteem, narcissists can improve their social image in the minds and eyes of others. Image is everything to narcissists, and they have the ability to greatly alter their image through social media which will, in turn, boost their “ranking” in the eyes of others. “The fact that we can control exactly what information we present to others while online offers us a freedom” (Maasik, 452). Narcissists love having this control over their image and will use all the different avenues offered through social media to give them that higher status. They advertise what they believe to be their “better side” and their “better qualities” through pictures, videos, and personal remarks. One of the more screamingly

obvious signs of self-glorification is the frequent changing of such things as a profile picture; they always have to have the best, most current photo of themselves on display for everyone to see and compliment. Differentiating between true self-esteem and narcissism is easy once one realizes that it is all a matter of perspective. While narcissists are focused on how they can brag about themselves and how they can promote themselves, those of true self-esteem seek to use their real life situations and personal breakthroughs to encourage and reach out to those who find themselves in similar situations. For narcissists, Facebook is an amazing tool that easily allows them to promote themselves. Since they are doing it with self in mind rather than others, it is not a sign of real self-esteem as it does not attempt to reach out and lift up those who are hurting or need simple encouragement. Narcissism truly focuses on self while self-esteem focuses on others.

Not limiting social media conduct and exalting a false persona are becoming prevalent in today’s social mediums; in fact, one could say that narcissism is running rampant in American society. Just as Narcissus was shot down whilst staring at his rather gorgeous self, these narcissists will also be cut down to their lowest levels which will only reveal their shallow characters and their intense fear of themselves. By merely using social media as a way to connect with the important people in life and not as a way to advertise a fabricated image, this narcissism could become less of an issue in American society. ♦

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THE COLLEGIATE CORRUPTION

DAWN IMINSKI

ESSAY

My decision to go to college was one that was easy to make. No matter how apprehensive the journey in front of me looked, it was a step that I had to take. Like Alfred Lubrano, I, too, came from a lower, working class family in which no one had ever attended college. Wanting to break the cycle of poverty, ignorance, and addiction in my family, I knew that getting a college education would prove to be the way out of it. What I did not know is how the experience would disconnect me from some relationships, while it strengthened others. Having read Lubrano’s “The Shock of Education: How College Corrupts”, I can identify with the struggles he faced trying to maintain the relationships that were weakened by his level of education.

Being a high school drop-out, my education was barely that of a tenth grader. This was no big shock to anyone in my family because both of my parents dropped out of school in or near tenth grade. As far as my sisters are concerned, both of them did not graduate high school either. Coming from less than fortunate beginnings, work and making ends meet were the only focus at home. My father was a hard working carpenter and my mother, a waitress turned cosmetologist. Time passed and I followed my mother’s footsteps and became

a teen mother and a waitress, and then I was licensed as a cosmetologist. This was not enough for me. I knew there was more than the way of life I had accepted, and I wanted to give it to my daughters.

Eighteen years have passed since I dropped out of high school. My children are older, and I now have the opportunity to go to college like so many others I respect and admire. Having earned a few college credits, a noticeable difference in topics of discussion appear when talking with my parents or siblings. I tend to stick to simpler subjects and everyday catching up when we have conversations. The reason is that they cannot relate to the things I have been learning, or they cannot tolerate me challenging a tradition within their belief system. To maintain peace, I choose to avoid those topics when speaking with them.

Along with avoiding topics my family cannot understand, I have noticed that I can relate more to those who have attended college. While fellowshiping with my friends at church, the harsh reality that I no longer have much in common with the people I associate with arises. While I juggle my home, my children, my ministry, and my school work, most of the women I have friendships with either do not have children, or are stay at home

mothers who rarely work outside of their home. Most of them were married right out of high school and stayed content making a home and raising their children. I find it strange as there is a commonality shared because we are homemakers and mothers, but I can relate to their young adult children better. The young adult children who are attending their freshman or sophomore year of college are speaking my language. They know what a bio lab consists of. They know how diverse campus is and how to give credit to the right people when writing a paper. My family and friends would look at me like I had three heads if I asked them how to cite a source.

College can be challenging. It may cause some tension in existing relationships, but it is worth it. Not only has college given me a great opportunity to better myself, but all three of my daughters are influenced by my decision to return to school. I am setting the example. I am setting the bar of where I can expect their academic career to take them. I am living proof that one does not have to settle for the hand life and circumstance has dealt them. I have shown them that a little bit of ambition and determination go a long way, and they can be whatever they want to be—anything is possible. One of the most rewarding sounds is hearing my daughter, who is in middle-school, snicker at me when I have homework, or

when I am struggling over an algebraic expression. She understands where my frustration is coming from and comments, “yea—now you know how I feel”. These moments somehow keep us connected. As my children and I sit at the kitchen table studying or reading, the delicate silence we share is the conversation that keeps us connected. My college education gives me the ability to help them with school work that I would have otherwise not had a clue about. This keeps us connected.

There is truth to the title of Lubrano’s text. College does corrupt. For me, it corrupted an idea that I had to be what my parents were. Even though going to college has caused deterioration to some relationships with my family and loved ones, the experience has enhanced and reinforced other relationships that I maintain. By my leading, a brighter future has been offered to my children. People I know who have since thought that it was too late for them to get an education are considering going to college now. The most important idea that I have grasped since enrolling in college is that I will never know everything; therefore, I can never stop learning. The more I know and am taught, the greater the legacy I can leave behind. ♦

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SWIMMING: A LOVE HATE RELATIONSHIP

VICTORIA SZUMINSKI **ESSAY**

If you ask any swimmer how they feel about swimming, they will tell you that it is a sport that develops a love-hate relationship with its athletes. We love the success that it gives and the first place medals, but we hate that there is no “finish line.” In basketball the goal is to put the ball in the hoop, in swimming we race time and that is it. Of course, there is a finish to our individual race when we hit the wall and see our time. I am talking about the even longer races against time. When I swam, pressures of never having an actual end result drove me crazy. At the 2014 Speedo Sectional Swimming Meet, that is exactly what happened to me.

I feel numb. The weight of the world is on my shoulders. I block out everyone around me and let my mind analyze my surroundings. ‘This is a Division I college natatorium, a Big Ten school, and I get the privilege to swim here. I did the work to be here.’ The ceilings seem one hundred feet tall, the pool has a slight smell of chlorine rather than the thick, overbearing one in Saint Clair High School. Indiana University had several banners hanging showing off their won championships, and even banners of past athletes that went on to the Olympics. The lighting is perfect, making the pool look shallower and the water sky blue. The air is light and has little to no humidity. ‘There is no way I can compete against these swimmers, they are all a foot taller than me.’ I want to just jump in the pool right now and swim my race while no one is paying attention—that would take some of the pressure off. Although I swim in over 100 different natatoriums every year, this was one is different. This Natatorium feels lucky.

Although I was happy that I qualified to compete at the Sectional meet, some part of me felt remorse. I wanted to take a break. After the high school season ended, I missed my goal of swimming 57 seconds in the butterfly. My confidence was over shadowed by doubt and skepticism. I swam everyday for a year hoping to be first in the state for 100 butterfly and to qualify for Junior Nationals. I came one second short of a Junior Nationals cut but qualified for Sectionals. When I agreed to swim at Sectionals, I agreed to longer morning practices before school, longer weight training sessions, and lastly, early Saturday morning practices for an additional four months. On top of thirty hours a week of training, I gave my brain a workout by balancing all the stresses of high school and college classes. My coach persuaded me with my own pride. “You will be the first one to swim 57 seconds in the 100 butterfly in Saint Clair High School’s history and you will go on to Junior Nationals. There are also two relays counting on you.” I could not be selfish and prevent my teammates from going to Sectionals solely because I did not want to do the extra work. After the hours of training, the blood, the sweat, the tears, and building up my confidence, I was ready to compete with the “big dogs” at the Sectional meet.

My body feels stiff and fatigued already. I haven’t even got through warm up yet. My muscles feel like they are full of lead. It is the day that I swim my individual event, my favorite event since I was 4 years old—the 100 meter butterfly. The 100 butterfly is the sixth event of the day. I desperately pray that I will be able to hold my own against these swimmers. Even the Wayne State University Assistant Coach is on the side of the pool. ‘I don’t care that I have bronchitis. I don’t care that I put hours of work into swimming. I don’t care if I come in last, I just want to qualify for Junior Nationals’. ‘Event 5 Heat 7! Next event, the 100 meter butterfly!’ says the announcer. ‘Oh shoot, my event is next. What stroke do I have to swim? How many laps is it again?’ My coach interrupts my chaotic thoughts, “ You know you have put in the work. This is what I trained you

for since you were two feet tall. Now go get ‘em!’” Although Coach has confidence in me, I do not. I stand alone behind Lane 1, knowing how much the next 100 meters is going to hurt. “Ladies and Gentlemen, Event 6 Heat 1. Swimmers step up.” Almost stumbling I manage to get on the block, I feel my body uncontrollably shaking like it does every time before I hit the water. I contain my adrenaline rush until I absolutely need it. I take my mark and hold my body as still as I can. I explode off the block and into the pool. My body cuts through the water. I push the water deeper and with more force than I ever have before. The first lap is a breeze. I think I can hold my pace for another 50 meters. I am quickly mistaken after I push off the wall and begin the last half of my race. My lungs shrivel up to the size of raisins. I gasp for air frantically. The swimmers in the lanes next to me excel while I struggle to keep going. My muscles burn, feeling over worked and ripped apart with every move I make. The last two yards are brutal. I even feel pain in my bellybutton. I hit the touch pad. I rip my goggles off and look at the clock—59.4 seconds—I add time. I lift my body out the pool and unwillingly tremble. “Could you breathe because for the second half of the race..... ‘Tomorrow is when it really counts. I can’t let my relay team down, even though I let myself down.’ The beads of water are oddly warm sliding down my body. My suit is so tight I have red marks on my collar bones. ‘I still cannot breathe, and why is Coach talking to me, I am not even listening. I hate swimming, I can’t do this anymore, what a waste of all my hard work.’”

All of the time I spent preparing for that moment felt wasted. I had to pretend to care about the next day to avoid letting my relay team down. ‘Colleges don’t look at relay performances, they look at individual events,’ I thought apprehensively. I did not feel good, I couldn’t breathe, and there was no way that my body would recover from Bronchitis over night. If that was not enough, I felt the Wayne State Coach’s dissatisfaction. Was the next day of competition even worth it anymore?

It is our final day of competing. It is the day of the 400 meter medley relay. For the last time in the season, I have to face the 100 meter butterfly, but this time with my teammates behind the lane with me, all working together. Meghan and Grace swim before me like always, and maintain the pace with the other swimmers in our heat. I dive in like I have hundreds of times before. Surprisingly, I feel even better than yesterday and almost like I am back to full health. ‘Done with the first 50 meters, now for the second half. Just keep pushing through it, it will be over in thirty seconds.’ Although I am battling bronchitis, I fill my lungs with the precious air that I could not get into my lungs the day before. I take the second lap with full throttle. I push my body more and more and prevent myself to breathe for the last two meters. I finish strong. Coach tells me my split—I finally went a 58.4 in the 100 meter butterfly! I finally feel the success I deserve. I am on cloud nine and maybe I love swimming again. At least, that is what I thought at that moment.

Throughout that weekend, I battled my love hate relationship with my sport. Swimming requires its athletes to chase time rather than their opponents. The pressure of always putting everything I had into swimming and never getting the results eventually caught up with me. Time eventually out swam me, and I grew tired of trying to keep up. Ultimately, I decided not to pursue my college swimming career because I have lost my confidence and my passion for swimming. Others around can me see my potential in swimming, and often encourage me to come back. I finally got out of that unfulfilling world, why would I want to go back? Even though I lost the passion, I left with good memories. Sectionals was the event that killed my love for swimming even though I hit my best time there. I was built up on the number one podium, and when I fell— I fell hard, making me hate swimming once and for all. ♦

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

JACQUELINE SCHRADER **SHORT STORY**

It looked as though it would be an idyllic day. The weather was forecast to be sunny---warm enough to enjoy but not hot enough to be uncomfortable. Gray dusk had spread across the sky as it began to herald the morning, lighting up a neighborhood of perfectly maintained houses and perfectly maintained yards with two cars, 2.5 kids, and perhaps a pet or two. School had been released for the summer, so children slept in a bit later than normal. For the working parents, however, the daily routine continued uninterrupted regardless of the season.

So it was too in the third house on the first street. The mother had been disturbed from her sleep by the movements of her husband getting out of bed and getting ready for work. The father moved angrily, with heavy footfalls, opening and closing dresser drawers roughly.

“Are you just going to keep sulking like a child? How do you think the kids will feel if they see you keep acting like this?” The mother’s tone was hushed but irritated.

“Sulking?” I don’t ‘sulk’”, the father replied. There was a bang as the closet doors were opened quite abruptly.

“I don’t know what you call it, then.”

“Whose fault do you think this is? If you hadn’t---”

“Oh, sure, everything in your life is my fault. How typical of you.”

“Don’t even start with that!” His tone was sharp and harsh.

“Start with what?”

“With that dismissive, condescending tone. Your problem is that you don’t think about anyone but yourself.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m such a terrible person. So evil, thinking about our children?” The mother’s voice was taunting, almost singsong, like she was speaking to a child.

“Really? Are you really going to do this? Stop putting words in my mouth. You always take everything to the most ridiculous extreme. That’s the problem with you.” There were footfalls as someone moved. Probably the father.

“Oh, yeah, I’m the only one with problems. You’re Mr. Perfect after all. It’s perfectly fine for you to be critical, but if anyone says anything to you, you get---”

“This isn’t about me, this is about you.” His voice was sharp and low.

“Don’t cut me off when I’m talking.”

“Oh, please, you cut me off all the time!”

“Because I’m not getting through to you. You don’t listen.”

“You don’t listen!”

“I listen to everything you have to say. But most of what you have to say just isn’t worth listening to.” She spoke as though it were the simplest and most obvious thing in the world.

“I could say the same. Stop trying to make me out to be a bad guy!” His voice was angry but tinged with weariness all the same. She was wearing him down. She always did.

“Well, you certainly sound like a bad guy when you keep yelling. The walls in this house aren’t that thick. You had better not wake the kids up.” Too late for that. Was she really this clueless. Did she really think that the world began and ended with her bedroom walls, that they shielded everyone else in the house from those angry voices and nearly daily arguments?

“This isn’t yelling. It’s a raised voice. There’s a difference.” His voice had grown quiet and calm again.

“It’s not going to make any difference when to the kids when they end up in therapy.” Oh boy, not this again. Did the mother even listen to the things she said?

“What, thera---? They are not going to end up in therapy. You’re being ridiculous again, as usual. If they end up in therapy it will be because of you.” It was obvious that he was trying hard to keep his voice down. He sounded strained, like he wanted to yell but managed to contain himself at the last moment.

“Oh, yeah? That would be difficult to imagine since I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Oh, of course not, you never do, do you?” An exasperated voice now.

“Tell me what I did that was so wrong then.”

As expected, he fell for the bait. “Oh, I don’t know, how about yesterday?”

“I’m allowed to spend my money however I want.” Oh, so it was about money again, as usual.

He was getting irritated again. “Yeah? Is that what you think? How come your money is yours to spend and my money is also yours to spend?”

“You earn more money than me.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t contribute anything to the household expenses. Don’t you think I’d like to buy stuff for myself? Do you think I like seeing my paychecks get eaten up by bills and groceries? It’s so easy to go buy things when it’s other people’s money. You could have at least asked first.” The closet doors were banged shut.

“Oh, so now I have to ask your permission to do something? Do I have to ask your permission to leave the house too? Are we in Saudi Arabia?”

“You’re being ridiculous again.”

“No, you’re being ridiculous. Ask first, really? You don’t ever ask me first before you do something.” ♦

GENDER ROLED AND STEREOTYPED

SHELBY FRIDLINE **ESSAY**

For as long as I can remember I have loved sports. I loved watching sports, I loved learning about sports, and I loved playing sports. I didn't really do the typical things little girls are known to do. I was a huge tom boy. I would rather hang out with the guys and go to a sports game than go shopping and get my nails done with all the girls. This may not seem like it would be much of problem, but for me it turned into a very big one. My love for sports and my athleticism growing up affected me in many ways, both good and bad, because I didn't follow the gender role that society had set.

Growing up I was always playing sports or watching sports rather than playing with dolls or makeup. I liked everything from NASCAR to baseball and at school most of my friends were boys. I was always playing sports with all the boys whether it was at recess, after school, or at home. There hardly ever were any other girls there. I usually wore basketball or baseball jerseys or NASCAR shirts with a ball cap instead of dresses and skirts. For a while it was fine and I had a great time doing things that I loved with my friends, but once I started getting older it began to turn on me.

Once 4th grade came around, things started to change for me. It seemed this was the time where the girls and boys in my grade started to have crushes on each other and what not. My friends that were boys started to not want to hang out with me as much because they thought they were only supposed to like the pretty girls. I didn't have a lot girlfriend and girls didn't want to hang out with me because I was more like a boy and I didn't like to do the same things as them. There were girls that liked sports too but just not the same as I did. I started getting bullied every day. The other kids called me a boy, ugly, weird and so on. I always felt left out and felt like I had no friends. Kids made fun of me often and I didn't want to tell because I thought it was embarrassing. I would stand up for myself most of the time but no one was there to back me up. There were a couple times that I actually hit the hit the kids that made fun of me. This did not help me at all because little girls were not supposed to hit and punch.

These types of things went on for quite a while. Then once fifth and sixth grade came it became meaner and crueller. I was then called a butch or lesbian and other derogatory terms. Even though I didn't want to tell anyone because it was humiliating to me, I eventually

couldn't take it anymore and told my parents. The outcome of telling them was them making me switch schools in the middle of sixth grade. Before going to a new school I changed myself a lot, well at least my appearance. My mom and I went and bought all new clothes and got rid of most of my other clothes. I also got a more feminine haircut and went on to the new school with a whole new start. I was treated a lot nicer there and I already knew a girl there because we played travel softball together and she and all of her friends instantly accepted me into their group. Some of them liked playing sports too and it seemed more acceptable for me and other girls to take part in sports now that we were a little older. It still was not what I would like though. I would have liked the play football with the boys but there weren't any other girls doing that so I stuck with what my new friends were doing.

At the new school things seemed a lot better. I was treated much nicer than I was before and there were other girls to play sports with and boys actually wanted to talk to me. After that half a year at another school though, for some reason I wanted to go back to my old school.

I went back totally different than before even wearing a little bit of makeup because my mom said I was allowed to once I was in seventh grade. Everyone was gossiping about a new student when really it was just me. That was how big of a transformation I had made. It was to the point where people didn't even recognize me from six or seven months ago. I had so many people try and talk to me, both boys and girls. A lot of these people not too long ago had bullied me and made me go home crying everyday so I didn't talk back to many of them. After the first couple of days

everyone realized who I was but they were still much nicer to me. Seventh grade was the grade at my school where you could try out for sports teams. I was on the basketball, volleyball, and softball team and my mom even convinced me to join the cheerleading team. I had made a solid group of friends through sports. Eventually people started calling me a lesbian again and even a dyke now. I was also still called a man sometimes because I was stronger and better at sports than a lot of boys because girls hit puberty before boys. It didn't bother me as much because I had a group of friends to back me up and that was something I didn't have before.

High school came and things were much better for me. As a freshman I made the varsity basketball, volleyball, and softball team and dropped cheerleading. This started up some of the teasing again and I just tried to tell myself it was because they were jealous of me. I was actually embarrassed to tell people that I made all three varsity teams. Now looking back at it, it really saddens me because that is something I should have taken pride in, not something to be embarrassed about. Although I was praised for this, a lot of people actually made fun of me for this again calling me things like a butch or a lesbian. My friends didn't say this to me but there were times where I wondered if they said it behind my back.

After my freshman year I started to wonder if I wanted to even play sports any more. I still loved them but I constantly asked myself if it was worth all the pain I was having. My main sport is softball, and as you may know this sport is very often stereotyped as a lesbian sport. I had been playing on travel and federation teams since I was ten years old and I was

now finally beginning to talk to colleges and get offers for scholarships. I didn't want that anymore though and I decided I wanted to stop playing. The thousands of dollars my parents had spent on tournaments and camps and recruiting was all down the drain all because I was sick of being teased. After thinking about it all summer, I decided I wanted to stop playing sports all together. This was not what I wanted at all but I couldn't take all the teasing and name calling anymore.

When I didn't show up for volleyball tryouts in the fall my volleyball coach called me numerous times but I did not answer. She actually showed up at my house a couple days later to talk to me. The volleyball coach happened to be our school counselor as well so it seemed she knew just how to get me to talk. Before I knew I was sitting on my couch bawling and pouring my heart out to her and she did of course convince me to play again. I went on to keep playing all of my sports in high school and received high recognition and basketball and volleyball and I was awarded first team all-state in softball both my junior and senior year. However I still didn't want to play college softball. That is until my high school softball team won our first district title since 2001.

This is a day I can promise I will never, ever forget. On top of the only district win our girls sports had in years, something very memorable happened. To make a long story short I hit four homeruns that day to win the district title (no I am not exaggerating) which earned me an MVP interview. In this interview I was asked a lot of questions about the game, my training, and other things you would expect. The question that got me was "where are you off to play because it has to be somewhere good?" And for a second my happiness

went away because I realized how much I wished I had a good answer for the question, but I didn't. Walking back to my team and all of our supporters was just like a movie, it seemed like it was almost in slow motion as my team was running to me to hug me and everyone was chanting "MVP! MVP!" I honestly cannot remember a time when I was happier and it was then and there that I realized that I did not want to stop playing after this. As soon as I got home I called the SC4 softball coach to talk to him because I knew I could not stop playing, he was very happy that I called. To be honest, playing at a community college wasn't what I had in mind but I thought it was too late to go anywhere else.

After high school I went on to play with my summer teams the Athletics and we went undefeated that summer, winning both a state title and a national title. There were times that when my team was all talking about how they're playing at Michigan State or The University of Michigan, or North Dakota and more that I got very jealous but at least I had somewhere to go. Then something close to a miracle happened. I got an email from a coach at Wayne State University telling me that they had been watching me play this summer and would like me to come down for a tour. Wayne State is not far from my house, which is exactly what I wanted, it has a pre-vet program, which is the profession I want to go in to, and my best friend from my softball team was committed there. The next week I went down for a tour ad they offered me a full ride to play softball there. After I thought I had lost all hope, something good had finally happened so after a year of playing at SC4 I will finally be fulfilling my dreams.

Most people wouldn't think any problems come with being athletic, but for me it caused a lot

of problems. To me it seems all these problems were because of the gender roles that society has created. It seems for a long time girls weren't supposed to be athletic. They were supposed to do there makeup, go shopping, and so on. It does appear that women's sports are becoming more accepted but there are still a lot of societal rules that we have to follow when participating in a sport. It seems that while playing sports we still have to be pretty and nice and if not you are a lesbian or butch. It appears to me you also can't be too good at them or, again, you will be stereotyped. For example, I went to new place called "Sky Zone" where you can play dodgeball. After playing I heard one guy say about me " yeah she's definitely a lesbian" and another boy actually come up to me and say to my face " are you a lesbian because that would be really hot." I just never will fit into the feminine gender role and I have come to accept that.

All my life I have been stereotyped because I am not as feminine as society wants me to be. While I am glad I don't dress like a boy anymore, I couldn't imagine my life without sports all because I was made fun of for being a little more athletic than other girls. I have now learned to accept myself and not listen to all those stereotypes. It can be hard sometimes because of the constant harassment I went through as a child, but it really has shaped who I am today. I am stronger than ever because of all this. I have become desensitized to most teasing and taunting. I try to look at things in a positive way and I now know that after every storm there's a rainbow no matter how much it pours. I try not to judge a book by its cover because I know what it's like to be stereotyped your whole life and in my case everyone was wrong. Now I am mostly praised on my athletic accomplishes and although it caused me a lot

of pain growing up, I try to think of all the little girls that I know look up to me and write me letters and ask me to come help them with softball. Now it seems to be getting more and more acceptable for girls to be very athletic because gender roles are altering, I guess I was just caught up in the wrong time frame. ♦

MY DAUGHTER THE DIRT PRINCESS

JOSEPH ZOBAY

ESSAY

On the cold night of December 3rd, 2010, my longtime girlfriend of the time, Kirstie, went into labor. I had prepared for this moment mentally for the past month or so. The bag was always in the car wherever we went and I never would stray too far from home or the hospital. So when I heard those two words I immediately put my carefully rehearsed plan into action. Get our coats on, get in the car, let the hospital know where coming and notify the new grandparents enroute.

Around 11 pm, we finally reached Port Huron hospital and Kirstie was rushed to the maternity ward. As I parked the car, three things were weighing heavy on my mind. Would Kirstie be ok, is the baby going to

be healthy, and the biggest question of all, can I step up and take on the monumental task that is about to be bestowed upon me? As I came up into the room, the nurse reassured me everything was copacetic and now it was just a waiting game.

I can say with certainty that having a daughter is a truly wonderful experience and becoming a father is an awesome, albeit scary, series of events. We were waiting for my daughter to arrive and the nurses had to wake the OBGYN out of a dead sleep. My daughter was important, and even before her birth, she commanded the attention of all around her. I was scared and nervous. What was being a father like? How do you even change a diaper? How, in 20 years, do you take a little wriggling baby, and prepare it for another 80

years of life? Life that is so harsh and cruel, with its bills, responsibilities and jobs. How was I supposed to teach her anything when I knew exactly jack shit myself! I did not know how to play with a kid nor did I know if I should even hold her when she was born! Soon, experience would give me my answers.

At 11:45, Kirstie's doctor came in, and we were well on our way to becoming parents.

Nothing of what I saw that night was scary or surprising, except for one thing. Just after midnight on Dec 4th, 2010, Iris Mae Zobay came into the world carrying on loud enough for all to hear. A few minutes after the doctors plopped Iris on the table, she immediately quieted down, and just kind of looked around. Meanwhile she stared at the lights, the doctors, at her mother, and finally at me, with a...*wonder*. It's as if she was just overtaken by all the sights and sounds and people, that she completely forgot she was cold. It seemed like a million questions had just popped into her mind, and she wanted answers to all of them. She was passed to her mother, and after a few minutes, she was passed on to me. She grabbed my hand and I looked into her eyes for the first time. I saw wonder, amazement, and happiness. I saw the wonderful little girl that was going to be. I'll remember that moment forever.

Swaddle Child that was my nickname for Iris when she was first born. She was very calm, hardly ever cried. She was content just being held, or sitting on the floor watching the ceiling fan spin around in circles. I tried to spend as much time as I could with her. Unfortunately, I was a truck driver and I was never home as I was always on the road. I would only get a few days at home a month; and therefore in those few days, I tried to divide them evenly between my family, friends, daughter, and Kirstie. I failed miserably to do so, which ultimately lead to Iris being with her

mother 99% of the time. That meant I was just a stranger to Iris. At 10 months old, you can't expect a baby to remember you when you're not home 27 days out of the month. Iris cried whenever I tried to hold her; furthermore she would reach for her mother whenever she would walk past. This hurt me even though I knew there was nothing I could do. I regret the decision to get my license hence why I always feel that maybe if I had been

around more often, I would still have a family. There were times that I felt like a horrible father, I wondered if I should've just given up? I'm glad that I didn't. Everything I regret now would pale in comparison to the regret I would feel if I had just given up.

It was hard to play with her, as I didn't know what to do with a swaddled baby. I just cooed and talked to her, and tried my best to entertain her by picking her up and holding her.

As long as I was there, I didn’t care. I wanted to be a positive force in her life. Someone she could turn to when she needed answers. I’ve always gotten this feeling since the day she was born that she would be a very unique girl. Have you ever seen those girls who are 26 and 40 years old who dress up as fairies and princesses, who go to conventions? These are the girls that dress up as “The Book Fairy” and host a book fair at their old elementary school. That’s going to be her, a very artistic and expressive person. Someone as interesting as her will do great things; people will want to get to know her. Just say her name, Iris, doesn’t that sound like someone important or special? I know she will be well off in life, she has unique looks, a determined attitude and snappy attire. This tri-fecta will unlock any door that happens to be closed to her. As her father, I know it is my job to make sure that she knows not to rely on just one attribute, but to use all three in combination, as a classy woman should.

Her general demeanor has always been that of a happy child. She loves nature, anything to do with the outdoors really. When she was two, bugs were all the rage. There was plenty to go around so this wasn’t a problem. We’d stay in the yard for hours, just wandering around looking at rocks and bugs or leaves. Rainy days were always good, I’d dress her up in rain gear and we’d go outside looking for things that crawled in the moist dirt. Worms were the theme on those days, as the moist ground would surely provide an absolute haven for them as well as frogs. It was a blast watching her scamper around the yard, splashing though mud puddles chasing a frog that was hippitty hopping this way and that to avoid her.

Now Iris is three, and her girlishness has bloomed in full this past summer. We still look for bugs outside in the rain. The playing in the mud thing hasn’t changed either, but now she wants to paint her nails, and wear pony tails. That’s my little girl, a pink tutu and some dirt, and she’s happy. Don’t even try to get her to go inside, because Iris will have none of it. Whenever I see her, it’s “Daddy I want to go to the park!” or “Daddy I want to go play outside with grandma!” That’s not to say she never goes inside, but it’s very rare and short lived, especially in the summer. Inside is just so boring for her. Nonetheless, she will find something to do. I’ll find her laying on the floor coloring or watching *My Little Pony*, when I can find it on the TV.

Sometimes we’ll go to her Uncle Kurt’s farm which is another one of her favorite places. There’s always a horse or donkey running around that she can look at. Cats are the main attraction there and they just had a litter last spring. It’s a blast watching her play with kittens, holding them and carrying them around with a big smile on her face, or she’ll just sit down, and they’ll all jump and scamper around her, meowing and play fighting. She likes looking at the big beautiful horses; her favorite thing to do is feed them from her hand. One of her favorite things to do is play Barbies on the floor with Kurt’s mom, Mrs. Leslie. I’m trying to teach her drums while she’s over there, as that is where the music studio is. She loves the studio what with all kinds of instruments to play and music to make; it’s a little girls dream.

Fatherhood, it’s a sometimes scary road, but it’s the little joys along the way that can —make the journey

worthwhile. The first word, the reaction I get when I tickle her, seeing her exercise compassion. My daughter is the best thing that ever happened to me. She gives me hope, and a purpose. My daughter is a very gifted and brilliant young lady, whose place is in nature, with a bunch of cute furry animals, and she’s their dirt covered, tutu wearing princess. ♦

OBAMACARE: EFFECT ON EMERGENCY ROOM USAGE

MARISSA JESSEE **ESSAY**

Crying. High pitched persistent crying egged on by a humstrum melody of coughing and groaning seems like all you can hear as you sit in the waiting room. It’s the middle of the night, a Saturday, you went out with your friends earlier that day and had some dinner, that must have been less than thoroughly cooked, since now you’re at the hospital. You look around and see fifty people, maybe more, in a room of only thirty chairs. Some of the people are coughing with eyes glazed over, some are hunched over in their chairs groaning, other faintly sallow, and oh yes, the child wailing because his tummy hurts. Slightly disturbed, you look across from you just in time to see two doctors and some paramedics rush in someone that came by ambulance, the scene is horrific, and you have to look away. After a while, even though you understand that the hospital staff is busy, you start to get irritated. You’ve already been waiting an hour and the pain in your stomach is only getting worse. Now, you notice, there are even more people waiting, and nurses have started to move gurneys into the hallways to try and make room for all of the patients. Unfortunately, their efforts are to no avail and as the pain in your stomach becomes crippling, you are left sitting, waiting, wondering if you will ever be seen by a doctor. While this scenario may seem like just a bad dream, it is actually the cruel reality many Americans are greeted with when they go to a hospital emergency room. Overcrowding has been a problem in America’s emergency rooms for a long

time, and the common misbelief is that this overcrowding is caused by people without health insurance. Therefore it was assumed that a change in the American health care system would help reduce or even eliminate emergency room overcrowding, as well as many other obvious problems (uninsured Americans, life expectancy, etc.). In attempt to overhaul the United States Healthcare system the US government passed a law known as ObamaCare, it is also known as The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), that was intended to provide the 50 million uninsured Americans (2010) with health care coverage. Due to the law’s expansion of Medicaid and the requirement that all US citizens have health insurance, people believed that this could indeed be the solution to ER overcrowding. However, evidence suggests that it may just be doing the opposite.

Overcrowding in hospital emergency rooms is a growing problem in the United States. An ER can be considered overcrowded when there are more patients than there are beds available, but also when there are increased wait times (often being anywhere from twenty minutes to even a few hours).There are many factors that attribute to this problem and according to Robert W. Derlet, MD, and John R. Richards, MD, the main factors are, “hospital bed shortage, high medical acuity of patients, increasing patient volume, too few examination spaces, and shortage of RN staff” (2002, p. 1). Overcrowding is a

very dangerous problem, not only is it a nuisance to the ER staff but it can also have life altering consequences for the patients. “Overcrowding resulted in death, permanent disability, additional procedures, and increased length of hospitalization” (p. 1). In their study Derlet and Richards found that out of the surveys that were returned to them from the hospitals, 92 percent reported having overcrowding in their emergency rooms. Although there weren’t an extensive amount of hospitals in the survey, 92 percent is an overwhelmingly high percentage when that overcrowding can potentially, fatally affect people’s lives. Even if some of the hospitals emergency care departments could improve, the hospitals themselves are not the problem.The bottom line is that there are just too many patients going to emergency rooms.

While the exact cause of emergency room overcrowding is unknown (because there are many contributing factors) it is generally assumed that most of the patients, that cause the largest portion of the overcrowding, are there because they cannot get into a primary care doctor due to their lack of insurance. President Obama was among those who believed that lack of insurance was one of the main contributing factors to ER overcrowding. While trying to sell the idea of a universal health care program President Obama claimed, “One of the areas where we can potentially see some saving is a lot of those patients are being seen in the emergency room anyway, and if we are increasing prevention, if we are increasing wellness programs, we’re reducing the amount of emergency room care...” (2009). In this quote he was explaining how he thought ObamaCare would positively affect emergency room overcrowding. He claimed that since ObamaCare would provide Americans with the health insurance they need to see a family doctor, they would be able to receive

the preventative care needed to avoid emergency room visits. However this is not the case, according to a recent study, “the payer distribution for ER visits in 2006 was 17 percent by Medicare, 17 percent by the uninsured, 26 percent by Medicaid/SCHIP, and 40 percent by private insurance.” (2010). This just goes to show that it is not uninsured patients that cause the overflow in emergency rooms, as it had been rumored to be. The fact that uninsured patients aren’t the main contributing factor to ER overcrowding disproves Obama’s theory that universal health care could directly affect overcrowding in this manner. On the other hand, it could potentially increase ER overcrowding.

In order to comprehend why Obamacare wouldn’t effectively reduce, but potentially increase, ER overcrowding you have to step back and look at how it affects medicaid and in turn how that affects the emergency room ordeal. One of the main selling points of the Affordable Care Act was the fact that it was going to expand Medicaid. In other words states would be required to insure most citizens that earn 133 percent of the federal poverty level. This means that there would be seventeen million more people eligible for Medicaid than there were before the ACA was enacted. Normally this wouldn’t be a bad thing, however the fact that primary care doctors often turn away Medicaid patients (over those with private insurance) isn’t hidden knowledge. Patients with Medicaid are regularly turned away from the care they need because, on average, Medicaid pays family doctors and hospitals fifty two cents to every dollar paid by private insurance companies. Avik Roy, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, discussed the specifics about this problem in his book How Medicaid Fails the Poor.

Of the 10 Medicaid states, including Washington D.C., that pay doctors the least, nine are reliably blue states with left-leaning politics and expansive Medicaid programs: New York (where Medicaid pays 29 percent of what private insurers do), Rhode Island (29 percent), New Jersey (32 percent), California (38 percent), D.C. (38 percent), Maine (42 percent), Florida (44 percent), Illinois (46 percent), Minnesota (46 percent), and Michigan (47 percent).

Now imagine you're a primary-care doctor with a busy practice. Two people call asking for an appointment to see you today, and you have one slot open. Do you give that slot to the patient who has private insurance, or the one who has Medicaid? (2013, p. 13-4)

Roy provides a very valid point when he asks which patient you would chose. Considering the overwhelming difference in pay between Medicaid and private insurance, it isn't hard to see which patients doctors would most likely give an appointment to. Unfortunately, this is the case in many doctors offices and hospitals around the country. There seem to be more patients than doctors available, and those with Medicaid are more likely to get turned away, fifty nine percent more likely than patients with private insurance (Roy, p. 18).

When faced with the facts of how Medicaid is viewed by doctors and hospitals it is easy to see why the expansion of Medicaid would not make "preventive care" any easier for patients to receive. Many patients that fall within the 133 percent of the federal poverty level, and qualify for Medicaid cannot afford private insurance. This poses the struggle that they would then be forced to apply for Medicaid, since under ACA Americans without health insurance can be fined, according to Fox News

the fine, "starts at \$95 per person or 1 percent of family income, whichever is greater. But over the next couple years, it rises to \$695 per person." (2014) Thus, we're back to the problem of doctors turning away Medicaid patients. The Americans that in the end will be "forced" into applying for Medicaid will be left with no other option since they cannot afford private insurance, and then will be at much higher risk to be turned away from the care that they need.

There will potentially be seventeen million Americans forced to apply and enroll under Medicaid under the expansion, due to their incomes and the high costs of private insurance. That means there will be seventeen million Americans that will likely be turned away by primary-care doctors, and ultimately be left with no other choice but to go to a hospital emergency room for their health care needs. On a singular level, this might not pose a big problem. However, when you add an extra seventeen million Americans onto the already overloaded emergency rooms, you are left with one giant problem.

On the other hand, one might say that there would actually be no significant change in usage of the emergency room with the expansion of Medicaid. The amount of people using the emergency room wouldn't actually go up because the Americans that would be forced to apply for Medicaid are very likely currently uninsured. This would mean that they are probably already being turned away from primary-care doctors due to their lack of insurance and the unlikelihood that they would be able to afford their medical bills. However, this is not the case. While it is very likely that many of the Americans that will be forced to apply for Medicaid are currently uninsured, the assumption that they are probably already being turned away by primary-care doctors is not entirely accurate.

Sarah Hurtubise, a journalist for "The Daily Caller," gathered information from a study in Oregon and stated, "An updated report on the program in January found that those with Medicaid frequented emergency rooms at a higher rate than the uninsured, as a form of catch-all health care possibly because the coverage provides so little access to physicians themselves." (2014) All in all, even if a patient is uninsured, they are still potentially less likely to overuse, or even misuse, an emergency room than patients with Medicaid are.

In essence, all of the evidence suggests that medicaid can have a direct increase on emergency room overcrowding, despite the president's claims that the expansion of medicare under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act would decrease the overcrowding. Millions more Americans will be insured by Medicaid, and the fact that Medicaid pays doctors so much less than private insurance, proposes that many of those Americans will be denied care by primary-care physicians. In turn, many of those patients will then turn to the emergency room for their care, which will increase the foot traffic in the already grossly overcrowded in hospital emergency rooms. ♦

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RELEASE THE KRAKEN!

FIRST PLACE *ASHLEY STACY* CERAMIC



SELF-PORTRAIT

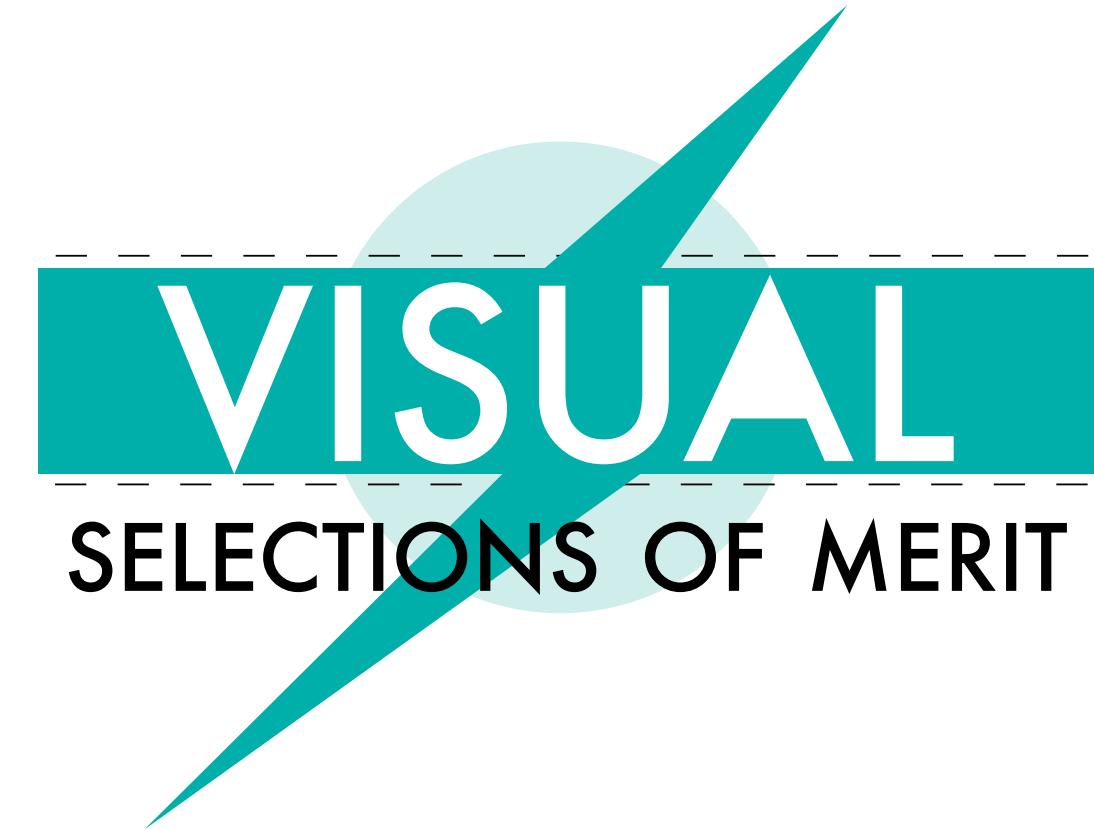
SECOND PLACE KRISTEN HAGER CHARCOAL



POLAR FLIGHT

THIRD PLACE BRAD STONE PHOTOGRAPHY





A ROOM WITH A VIEW

PETER BABCOCK **CERAMIC**



WINTERTIME AT THE BRIDGE

BRITTANY COLLINS **PHOTOGRAPHY**



TRI-PORTRAIT

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PHONOGRAM

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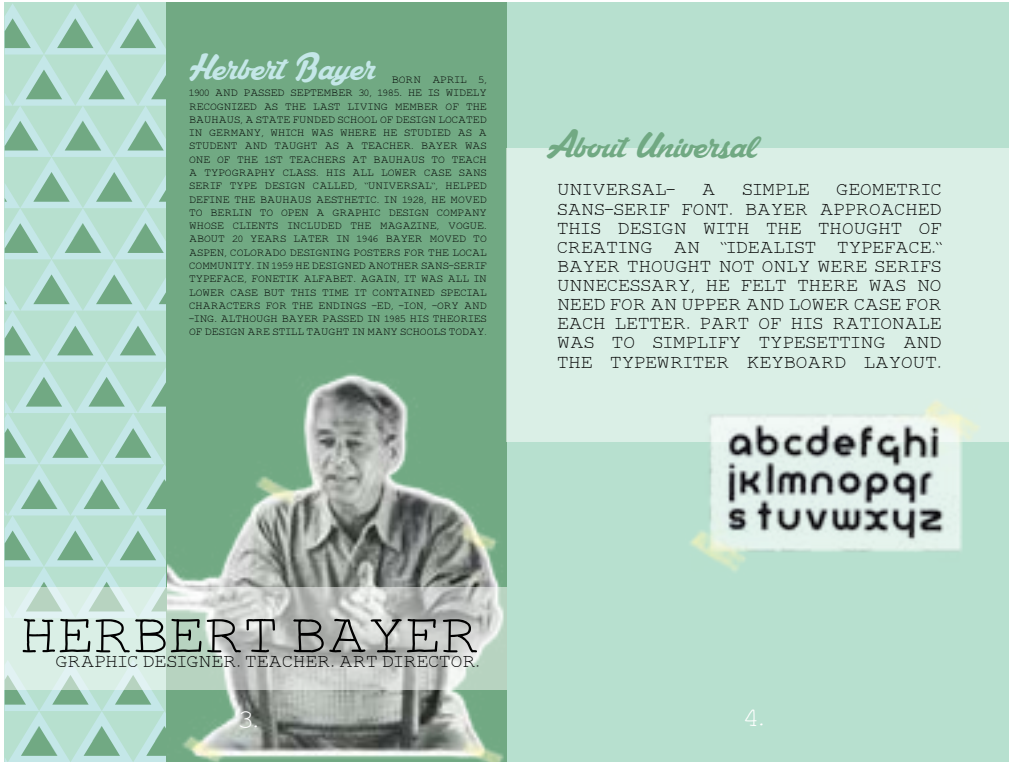
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2 TONE TEA SET

PATT GRIFFIN CERAMIC



LAST SEMESTER

PATT GRIFFIN CERAMIC



WIRE TREE

PAIGE FALK WIRE & STONE



SELF- PORTRAIT

KRISTEN HAGER **CHARCOAL**



SORT OF ANATOMICALLY CORRECT

ALEXIS DOWNEY **PASTEL**



AKASHA IN CHARCOAL

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SOMBER SEPTEMBER

HALEY HOYT PHOTOGRAPHY



CRIMSON CHRISTMAS

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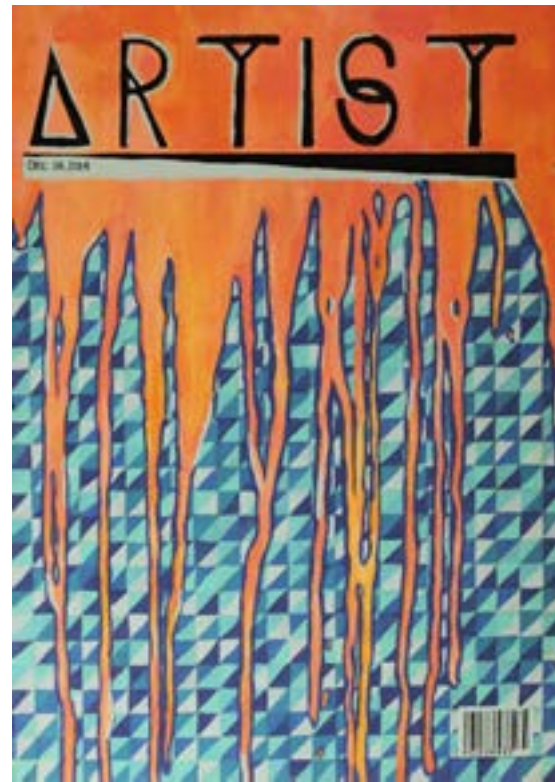
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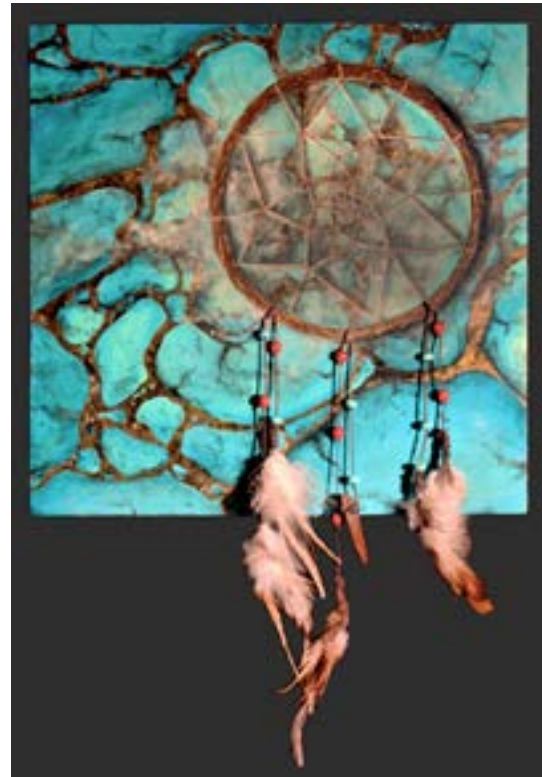
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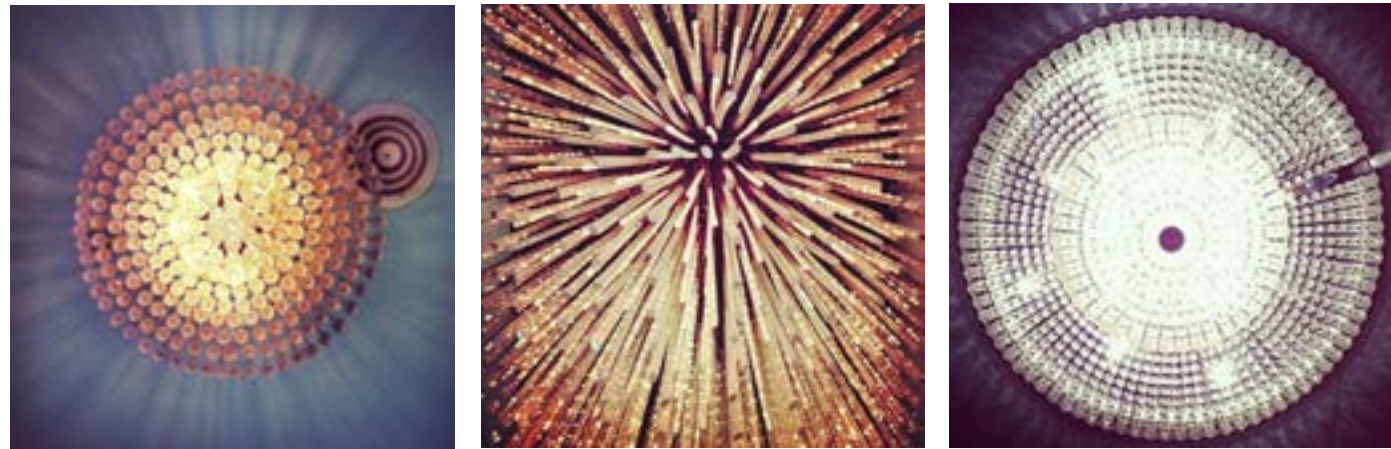
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MIKE LUCAS **ACRYLIC**



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FABULOUS HAIR

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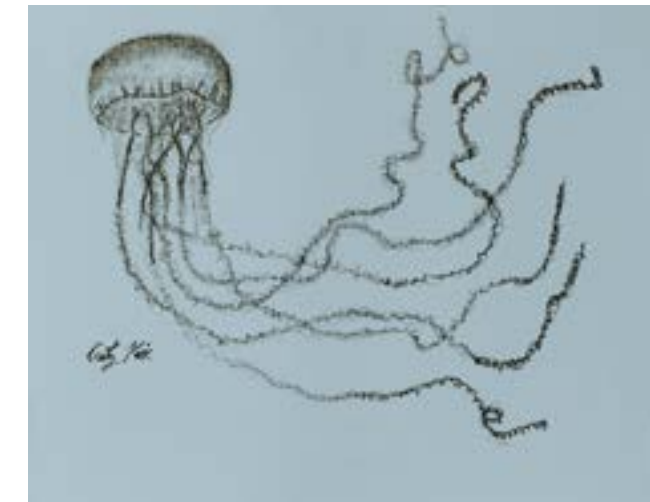
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DAY OF THE DEAD TEAPOT & MUGS

ASHLEY STACY **CERAMIC**



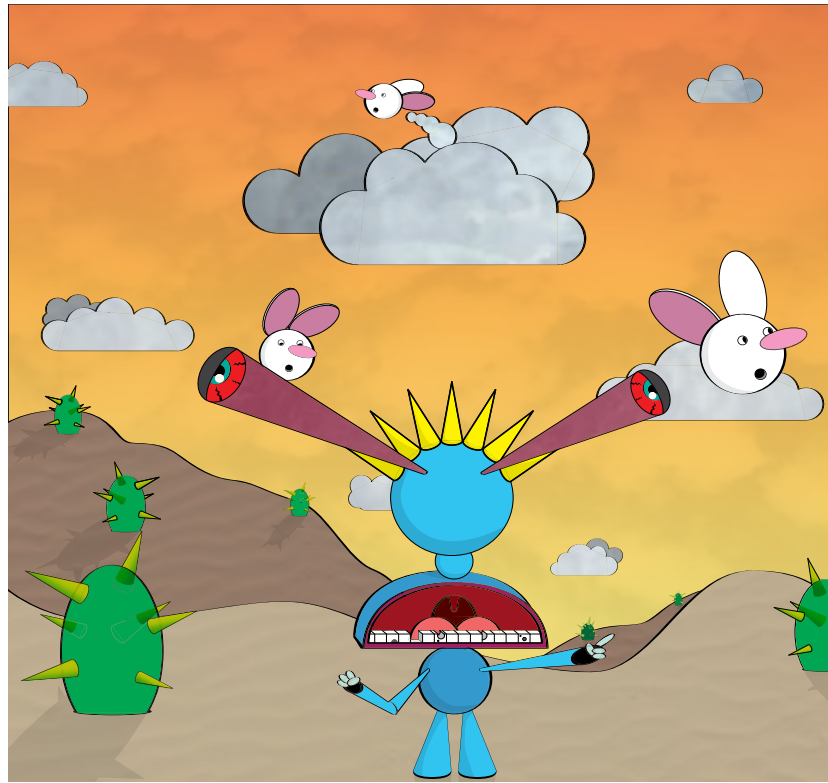
OCTOPUS HOT TUB

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DIGITALLY ILL

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BURNING FIRE

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THE MARBLE WOMAN

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TWO SIDES OF A TROUBLED MAN

BRAD STONE **CHARCOAL**



NEGATIVE

ERIN SULLIVAN CHARCOAL



HOME

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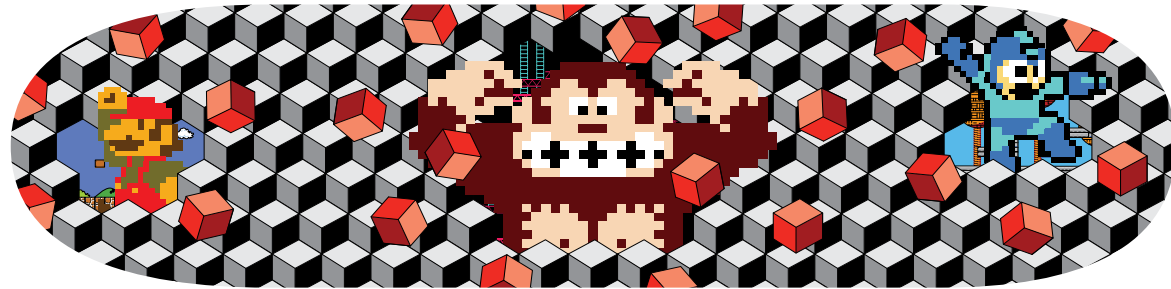
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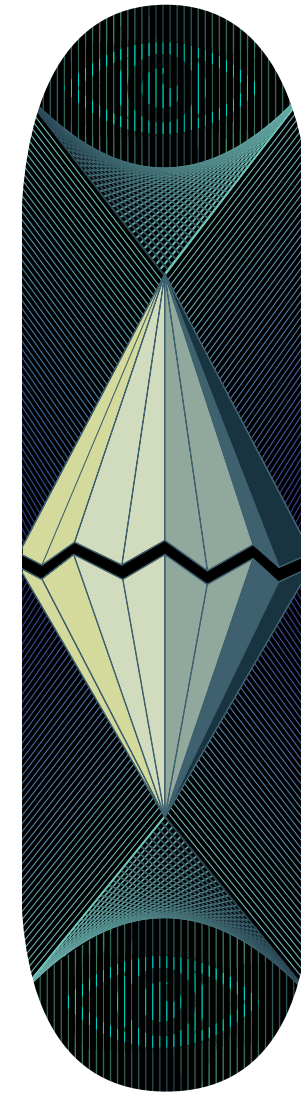
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